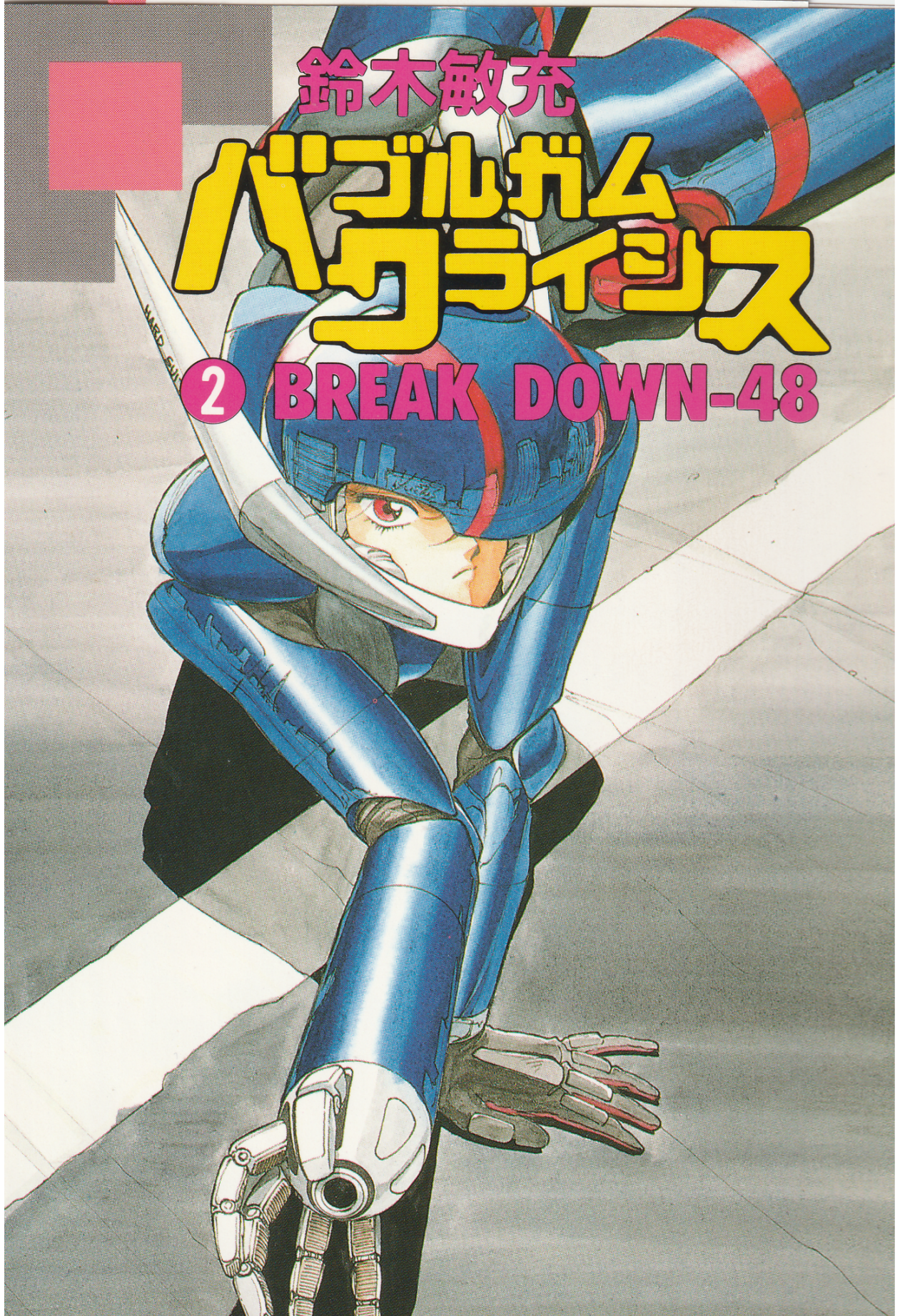


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バブルガム バクライシス

② BREAK DOWN-48



Bubblegum Crisis: Break Down-43

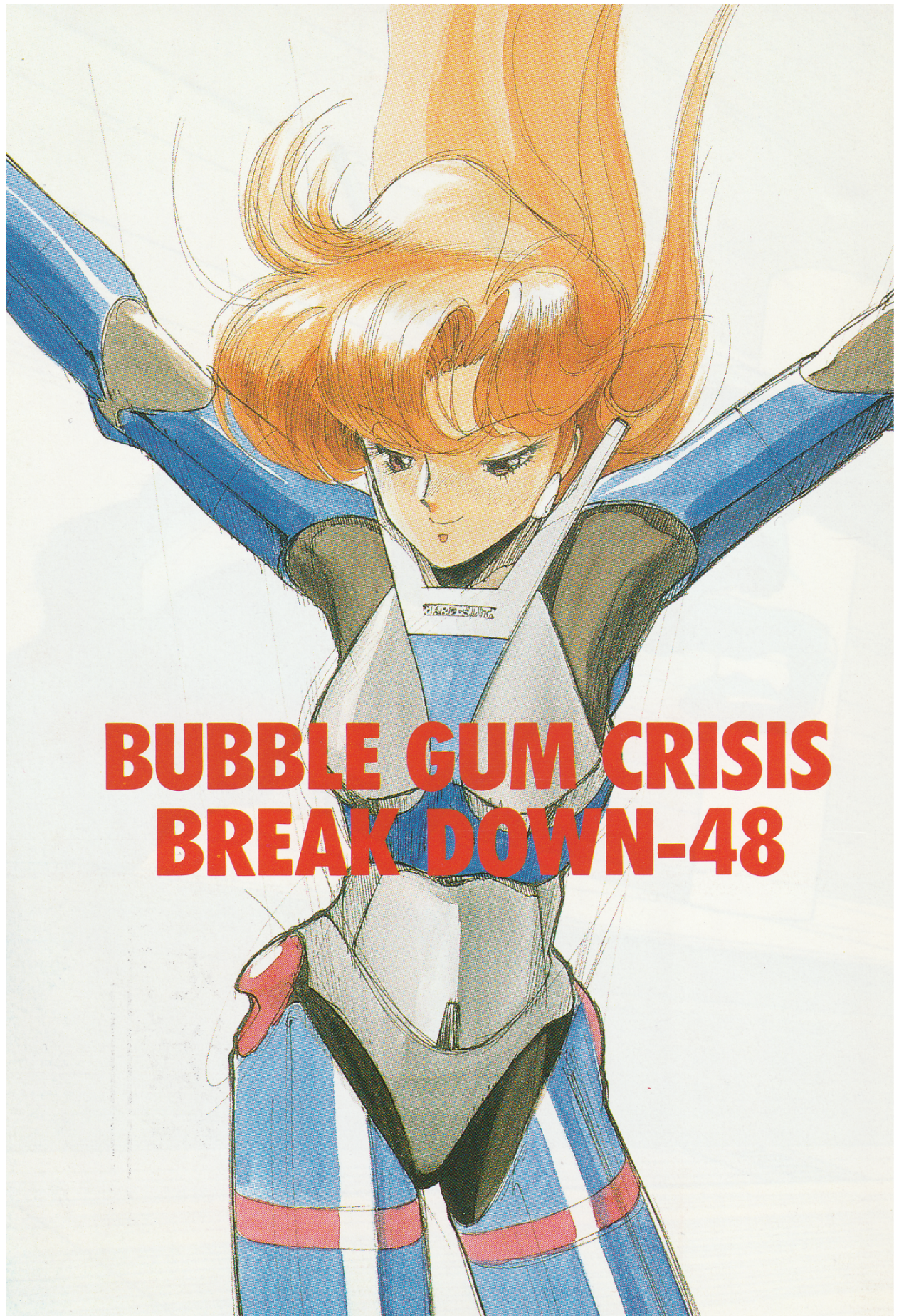
By Toshimichi Suzuki

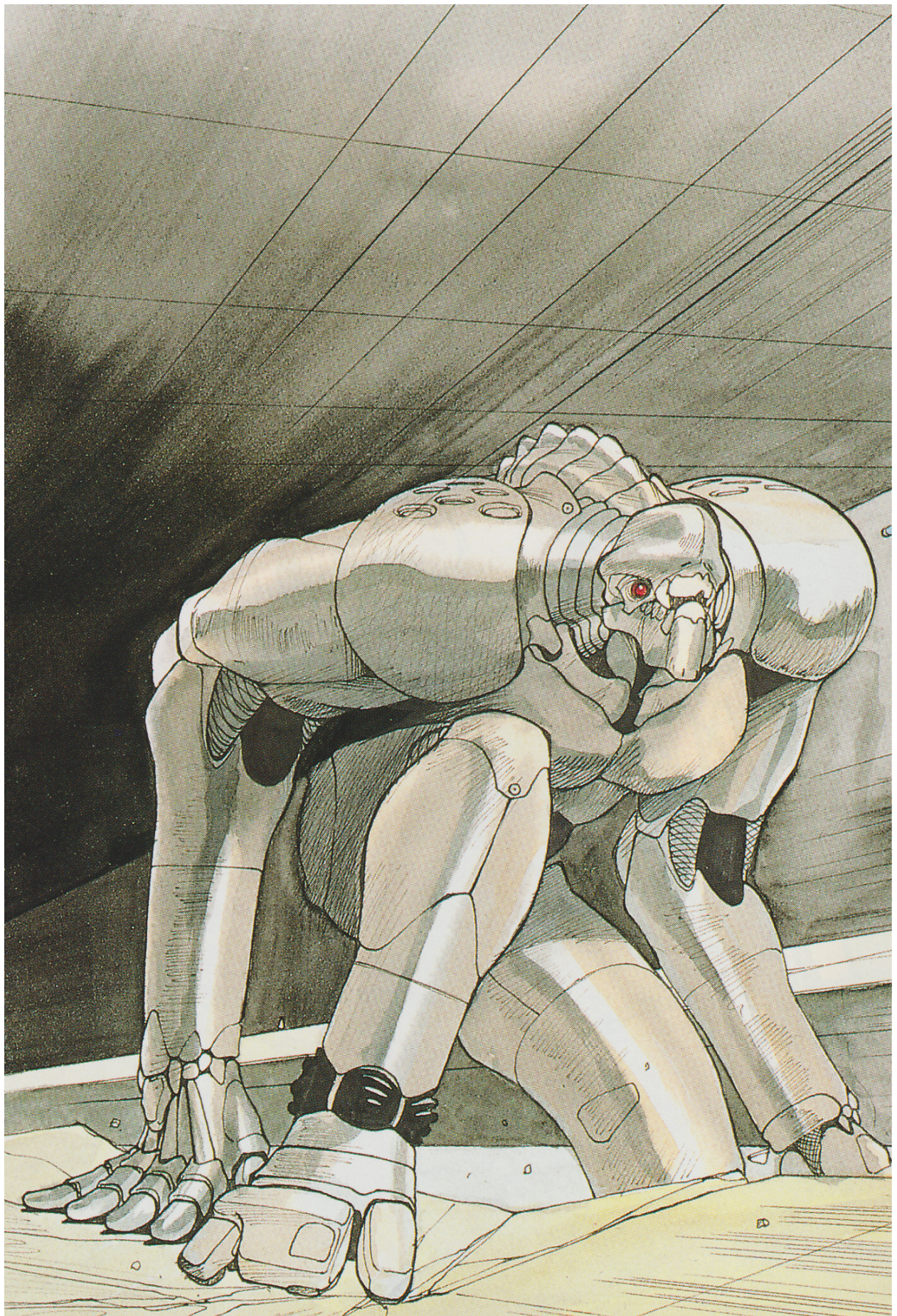
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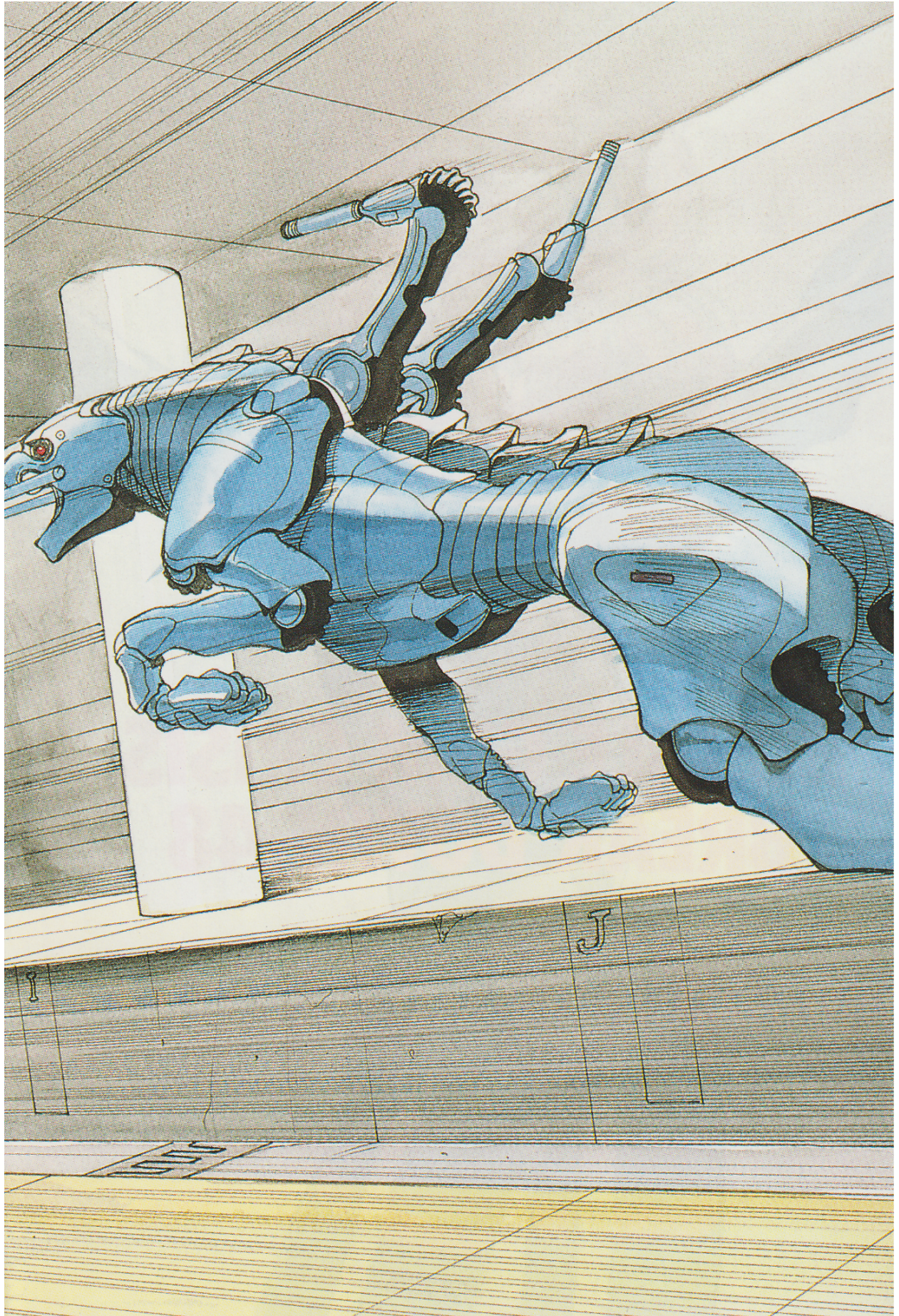
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Bubblegum Crisis: Break Down-43

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Prologue

The world's major cities truly awakened to their collective consciousness as massive data aggregates during the turbulent period of civilization between the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Driven by the demands of the era, global powers and giant private corporations engaged in a fierce struggle for dominance over patents and achievements in applied sciences—spanning astronomy, high-energy physics, microminiaturization, and environmental engineering.

The vanguards entrusted with the future were groups of scientists dedicated to research and development:

- Silicon Valley, USA: The mecca of computer-driven "swarm intelligence" (emergent brain) studies.
- Austin, Texas: Focused on astronomical theory and high-energy physics.
- Tsukuba, Japan: A hub for cybernetics, fiber optics, and high-speed computing.
- Rehovot, Israel & Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Pioneers in desert research, solar power storage, magnetohydrodynamics, and genetic engineering.
- Brittany, France: Early achievers in applying high-energy physics to ultra-high-speed linear motor trains.

Invested with massive capital from nations and private entities, these scientists pursued unknown fields with terrifying passion, seeking to glimpse the future—often regardless of their clients' original intentions.

As independent breakthroughs in electronics, quantum physics, and genetic engineering began to interfere and entwine with one another, they became the engine for future society. However, in this process, humanity gave birth to "Mechanical Lifeforms"—entities that might one day replace their creators.

The turning point was a breakthrough in 1988: the development of the Super Interface Computer. This allowed for the instantaneous mechanical processing of human brainwaves. By using codes based on biological auto-control functions, the computer could capture specific brainwave wavelengths and translate them into electrical signals it could understand. This "communion" between man and machine rapidly changed the world.

2007: Major cities were linked by high-density, ultra-high-speed intelligent networks. International treaties regarding computer rights were signed (excluding the Communist bloc).

2012: The Computer Responsibility Law was enacted to regulate the "runaway" potential of computers, which were beginning to surpass human capabilities.

In this era, GENOM emerged as a leader in the "compu-nication" industry. By 2005, GENOM developed "Biological Elements" (Bio-chips)—the first commercially viable biological computer components. This allowed them to expand into various industries, merging and absorbing competitors until they became a massive conglomerate. In Japan, "Japan equals GENOM" became a common saying.

However, the Morgan Foundation, a US-based multi-national conglomerate with an exclusive, nationalist core, viewed GENOM's rapid growth as an encroachment on its "stronghold." To suppress GENOM, they manipulated international military issues and trade imbalances to create an economic blockade.

To counter its enemies, GENOM looked toward "the enemy of my enemy" and undertook radical research.

In 2011, GENOM's "Whiz Laboratory" in Tokyo completed the Portable Bio-Pit. This was a practical model of the brain-to-interface computer, where a plug was

implanted near a major nerve bundle behind the human ear, allowing a person to become a "walking computer."

GENOM partnered with the USSD (Space Defense Force), blending robot engineering with cybernetics to dream of "Sub-humans"—mechanical lifeforms that transcended the concept of robots.

Dr. Stingray, a central figure in this development, secretly feared for the survival of humanity. He implanted a "Biological Brainwashing Element" (a virus-like program) into the artificial intelligence of these mechanical lifeforms. If their learning level exceeded a certain threshold (+850), the element would trigger, neutralizing their ability to apply logic and keeping them as "eternal servants of humanity."

By 2025, various models appeared:

- C-Series: Combat models with "Material Fusion" (Molecular bonding) capabilities.
- B-Series: Advanced space-combat models.
- S-Series: Sexaroids (pleasure models) designed to look identical to humans.

These became known as "BOOMERS" and proliferated across cities and battlefields.

The headquarters of GENOM is a massive, conical "Super Mega-Structure" in Tokyo's 6th District. Standing nearly 1,000 meters tall, it is a modern "Tower of Babel" that has been under construction for eight years and continues to grow toward the heavens.

The city is divided into:

The Inner District: An "intelligent" urban landscape of industry and academy, stripped of all humanity.

The Outer District: The chaotic "Old City" where gas-powered cars and modified humans live in a feverish, neglected atmosphere.

Christmas Eve, 2025:

A massive Magnitude 8.0 earthquake struck Tokyo. The city was rebuilt into "Tinsel City"—a place of superficial glitter hiding deep rot. It is a world of elderly people living too long through bionic organs and nihilistic biker gangs who expect to be "erased" by age 50.

In this city, the "Future" is a bubblegum-like expansion: colorful, inflated, and dangerously close to popping. This is the stage for a story of terror and confusion born from human technology.

Chapter 1: Anomaly

The GX-2 was connected to the terminal. He had already reached the threshold of completion—or rather, it would be more appropriate to say he had been born and begun to breathe. Like a human infant, being so newly arrived, he simply did not yet understand the reason for his existence. His life signs were visible only through the flickering reds, blues, and oranges of the graphical data on the monitors.

The Micro B.I.C. (Bio-Pit Interface Computer) embedded in his body was currently being fed the data necessary for him to function as a state-of-the-art combat Boomer in zero-G environments. Soon, his internal organic motors were supposed to engage, granting him vitality as he slowly and quietly awakened.

But the GX-2 did not follow the script.

Betraying the expectations of those watching, he suddenly tore through the bundle of data cables in the middle of the input process. His upper body snapped upright; he gave a single, violent shiver, and then began to lash out like a madman. Due to interference from an unknown external source, USSD's proud computer systems fell out of control, giving birth to the GX-2 as a terrifying cyberdroid.

The death cries of people being slaughtered by him filled the blackout-stricken, panicked laboratory. Through alarm systems, word of the incident reached the USSD Security Bureau in an instant. However, fearing that the development of a space-combat Boomer—illegal under international law—would be exposed, the USSD leadership ordered the Security Bureau to handle the matter in total secrecy, plotting to bury the entire affair in the shadows.

At this point, the leadership had no way of knowing the gravity of the situation. They grossly underestimated the GX-2's intelligence. They assumed that even for a B-Series Boomer, a newly "born" cyberdroid shouldn't take much effort to dispose of. Having manufactured countless Boomers in the past, such arrogance was perhaps natural to them.

But the GX-2 was not ordinary.

He rampaged as if possessed by a staggering hatred for humanity. In the maze-like underground passages where sirens wailed and emergency lights flickered, he moved toward the surface, scattering destructive energy in his wake.

Strangely, he seemed to possess a deep knowledge of everything humans had built; he appeared intimately familiar with the fragile nature of human beings and their behavioral patterns. More than that, it was as if he already understood the nature of his own existence and his innate mission.

The security teams jumping into this tragic vortex were pitiable. The heavy weaponry they carried, usually sufficient to destroy a Boomer, was utterly useless. They couldn't stop the GX-2's movement for even a second; the moment they poured out of the elevators, they became his prey.

What drove the GX-2 mad? While the USSD leadership sat in haggard exhaustion, this killing machine—a product of the madness of an arrogant elite hidden in the dark corners of Tinsel City—repeated its cycle of destruction and slaughter with a Boomer's characteristic ruthlessness before vanishing into the night of the metropolis.

The scars of the 2025 Second Great Kanto Earthquake remained as a massive fault line dividing North and South Tokyo. Because the damage was so catastrophic, the "Outer District" remained untouched and abandoned even seven years into the reconstruction. Frustrated by this administrative incompetence, the residents took the rebuilding into their own eyes. The result was a stark contrast to the orderly, ultra-modern "Inner District"—a slum of rubble and cheaply built new structures with no sense of balance.

In the downtown area of District 55, a crowd of frustrated youths gathered at a concert house called "HOT LEGS." Beneath the stylish pale-pink neon illumination, the door opened to reveal a vulgar atmosphere thick with the rhythm of loud rock music.

On a stage shrouded in smoke and backlit by laser beams, the club's headline band, "Priss and the Replicants," emerged. The heat from the packed floor blended with the energy radiating from the band. As a synth-drum solo began, the excitement reached a fever pitch.

The song was "Love Me Tonight," a cover of a late-80s rock ballad. Priss loved this song. As she sang, she stared into the ceiling spotlights, her eyes stinging as

she envisioned them as motorcycle headlights, picturing the face of a gentle man she once trusted.

*“So many nights / So many dreams / There are them running in /
There’s too much pressure in my sleep in my mind...”*

Priss sang with a slender body that trembled with emotion, her long blonde hair clinging to her sweaty cheeks and lips. To the lonely souls in the crowd dreaming of racing toward the cutting edge of the era, she was the Queen of Hot Legs.

In a corner of the club, a man in a black leather jacket watched her through the haze. This was Leon McNichol, a skilled detective of the AD Police—an organization established two years before the earthquake to deal with special crimes.

For Leon, who had been spun around by a relentless string of Boomer crimes and bizarre incidents since transferring from the regular police, coming to hear Priss sing was his only solace. Though he was in his mid-twenties and “HOT LEGS” was mostly a hangout for “teenyboppers,” he had his reasons.

Leon, the top “pickup artist” of the AD Police who usually flirted with any beautiful woman he met, was genuinely infatuated with Priss. He hoped her voice would drown out the permanent echoes of laser cannons and gunfire stuck in his brain.

Leon’s partner, Daley, often expressed his disapproval of Leon’s obsession. Because Leon was a man of many words who rarely spoke his true feelings, no one really knew why he liked Priss so much. Perhaps it was because he didn’t hear her songs as lyrics, but as monologues. He had seen the “truth” overflowing from her body—the strength and beauty of a “wildness” she had not yet lost. In a place like Tinsel City, where civilization had reached its peak, such life was a rare and precious thing.

The Boomer is a “walking tank,” powered by a specialized engine and covered head-to-toe in high-density molecular *Abotex* armor. The highest-tier “Fusion Function” types possess the additional ability to merge with other matter. If such a machine were ever misused, there was a genuine risk it could hijack an entire mechanized city.

Daley prayed it wasn’t a C-Series. Cold sweat poured from his body.

“It’s coming!” someone whispered urgently.

Two red points of light suddenly flickered in the darkness near the stairs. It was a Boomer in attack mode. As the VIX’s searchlight swept the area, a Boomer

standing nearly two meters tall was revealed, several sensors protruding from its eye sockets.

Both sides attacked simultaneously. The Boomer dodged the VIX's railgun fire and the officers' barrage, returning fire with beams from its mouth. It leaped through the corridor with terrifying speed, intent on using its overwhelming destructive power to force a close-quarters melee. The officers, faces pale with shock, fired their Diet guns wildly at the machine.

Mega-Tokyo erodes the spirit, making people ugly without them even realizing it. In a life of constant tension and pressure created by a city obsessed with technology, everyone carries profound, irredeemable stress, having forgotten even the meaning of the word "wild."

But Priss possessed it. That was why her song—the cry of a pure soul—clutched at the chests of all who heard it. Indeed, the very first time Leon had heard Priss sing, she had been performing this same song: "Love Me Tonight."

"Sing me a love song / Come hold me tight / Make me feel strong..."

A faint buzz of intoxication began to enhance Leon's sense of comfort. Just then, his multi-functional chronometer began to flash with a sharp electronic chirp. It was a summons from the AD Police. The time was 12:30 AM.

Leon placed his half-finished glass on the counter and, with a reluctant attitude, pushed through the crowd of youths to a booth in the back of the club. He slid his official credit card into the video phone and pressed the buttons. Daley appeared on the monitor.

"The Chief is furious, Leon! Something incredible is moving west on Canal Street in District 12. Might be a Boomer..." Daley's voice had its usual nasal, slightly campy tone. Leon cut the call with a sour expression and a brief acknowledgement. He settled the bill, pulled his weathered driving glasses from his breast pocket, and hurried out.

Leon mounted his GENOM-tuned bike—a V4 DOHC 5-valve beast—and woke the engine. The 4-into-1 exhaust note vibrated through the night. With a kick-down, he made a brilliant dash toward the Canal area.

The "Inner District" ahead of Leon was far noisier than during the day. In the government district, the "Mecca" of Tinsel City's administration, the remains of the demolished Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building were being cleared, and streets were constantly being dug up—wasting the national budget on the same spots three times over.

Does man keep the machines awake, or do the machines refuse to let man sleep? As if seeking the answer, the "New Tower"—a massive, sleepless fortress

of a water-city—loomed over the buildings toward the heavens. The "Tower" was a creepy monument to human arrogance and endless desire, a structure so unreal it made one hallucinate that it had existed since before the dawn of creation.



A "Fire Bee" portable combat helicopter flew near the mid-section of the Tower. These AD Police aerial units were known for their bravery and their nocturnal vision. Gilbert, pilot of Fire Bee Unit 5, adjusted his flight path.

"Movement confirmed on Canal Street. Appears to be armored infantry or a light walking-combat 'Elephant.' Requesting Formation E-080 for all AD units."

"Roger," a female dispatcher replied. Gilbert grunted to himself, *"Always so cold. I'm exhausted here, you could at least be a bit more friendly."*

Closing in, Gilbert saw the devastation: overturned squad cars on fire and the wreckage of civilian vehicles. AD Police officers in heat-resistant body armor were already on the scene tending to the wounded.

"This is Gilbert. Massive explosion at the district border. Civil and official casualties. Moving to Tinsel City Bank in District 13 to join Unit 8."

The "E" in E-080 stood for Execution and Elephant—a command to "unleash full power and crush the enemy like an elephant." It indicated 80% combat output, a rare and terrifying level of force. When the AD Police went "Elephant," they had enough power to take on the nation's entire military.

Special armored vehicles screeched to a halt in front of the bank, surrounded by standard squad cars. Heavily armed officers carrying high-caliber rapid-fire Riot Guns stepped out. The civilian onlookers watched with bated breath; for the residents of this stressed city, witnessing the AD Police's overwhelming force was a form of catharsis.

"Where is Leon, Daley? In an emergency like this?! That damn brat!" Chief Arthur roared, his bald head practically steaming with rage.

"He's on it, Chief. He'll head here after District 12 is cleared. More importantly, are you sure about sending in the VIX?"

"No choice! I have to make a show of it or our budget for the second half of the year gets slashed! Not that I care, but you go in there and give the brass something to be happy about!"

Daley sighed. "I can't take responsibility for the VIX. I have my own tastes in men, you know..."

"What's that supposed to be? You want me to play the part of your boyfriend instead?!" Arthur's face turned even rounder with anger. Daley quickly turned away before Arthur could bring up salary cuts.

"Roger, roger. I'll go play for the cameras."

The VIX—the "Motorcycle-Transforming Semi-Autonomous Assistant Droid VIX-19"—entered the dark hole of the bank's entrance, its ceramic gas turbine engine whirring like a hunting dog. Daley and three officers followed.

Inside, the traces of combat were everywhere. The alarm bells were strangely silent. They found the remains of several D-Series guard Boomers, destroyed with incredible force. As they reached the passage to the basement, the VIX's targeting system reacted violently.

"Wait!" Daley signaled. He had the VIX cut its searchlights to avoid becoming a target. He drew his large handgun and clicked off the safety.

A chilling sound came from the basement stairs. It was the sound of something hard scraping against metal steps—a heavy, metallic friction mixed with the whirring of organic motors.

"A Boomer? If so, what series? If it's a C-Series, we're in trouble... this place is too cramped," Daley thought. He knew the terrifying power of a C-Series; a single one could wipe out a heavily armed military platoon.

The worst part was the irony: the AD Police's own heavy weaponry was manufactured by GENOM, the same company that created the Boomers. It was a technological war of GENOM vs. GENOM. A C-Series was the pinnacle of that nightmare—equipped with self-repairing centers and "Fusion Functions" that could assimilate surrounding matter.

Daley stared into the abyss of the stairs, his heart syncing with the mechanical hum of the VIX, waiting for the monster to emerge.

"Joe, Rodriguez, Randy—withdraw! Fall back! Now! VIX! Give it the grenades!"

At Daley's cry, the VIX launched grenades from its chest. The team scrambled to escape as a deafening explosion roared behind them. A violent heat vacuum, born of the blast, chased them through the airless corridor. Their heads ringing from the roar and their feet unsteady from the tremors, they finally burst outside to find Arthur waiting.

"What happened in there? Where is the VIX? You'd better have an explanation, Daley!"

"Wait... just a second... huff... it was a nightmare! There really was... huff... a Boomer hiding in there..." Daley panted, reloading his empty sidearm while keeping a wary eye on the bank entrance. "It was... a ferocious one... huff... couldn't tell the type in the dark, but probably... a C-Series..."

"I don't care about that! I want to know what happened to the VIX! You didn't let it get trashed, did you?"

"Well... huff... I made sure to let it 'play' enough to satisfy your expectations, Chief..."

Arthur's eyes began to twitch with a rhythmic, nervous spasm. Just then, a figure appeared in the smoke-clogged entrance. Daley and the AD Police officers raised their guns in a reflex—but then lowered them.

"Hell of a show you put on. A 'kaboom' the second I walk in the back door. Really gets the heart racing," Leon said, emerging as he tucked a tiny emergency oxygen cylinder into his pocket.

"Leon!" Daley called out in relief, running over.

"Hey, Daley. The inside of that bank is a total mess. Might be out of commission for a while."

"Never mind that—what about *it*?"

"Yeah, looks like it's taken care of. Alright, bring it out! Just keep walking straight!" Leon shouted back into the bank.

From the smoke, the Power-Loader VIX emerged with faltering steps, a battered wreck of its former self. Most of its outer plating had been blown off; the flashy flame-patterned paint had burned away, leaving no trace of its original glory. It struggled to walk because half of its head was missing. Yet, the VIX held the pride of a victor—in its left manipulator, it clutched the severed head of the Boomer as a trophy. Arthur stood agape, eyes wide, as cheers erupted from the surrounding officers.

Leon handed a scrap of paper to Daley. "It's a Type-D, CY-15B, Unit Number CY-1001. This Boomer... it might be a legal, registered unit."

"Wait, a D-Series? You mean it was the bank's own watchdog?"

"Maybe. I don't know why it went haywire, but it's definitely not the one that rampaged in District 12."

"So... it's a different one. Which means the real perp is still out there."

Leon and Daley shared a grim nod before falling back into their usual banter as they left the scene. Meanwhile, Hammer's squad—the veteran "Pops" Hammer and his younger subordinates—moved into the bank to begin the forensic

investigation. Linked via the mobile communication unit, their every vital sign and movement were monitored by the technicians outside.

The bank floor was a graveyard of rubble. Wisps of fire flickered here and there, testifying to the power of the VIX's grenades. The walls of reinforced glass had shattered, exposing the frames and shafts of the raised floors, which had melted and warped under the intense heat.

Hammer wiped the sweat from his brow. The air inside held a faint, sickly-sweet scent. This was the smell of *Bio-Dimethyl Gramine*, a complex organic fluid used in Boomers. When the high-concentration compounds like *Prostaglandin* leak from a destroyed Boomer and vaporize upon contact with air, they create a toxic gas. While not lethal to humans, it causes intense vomiting and nerve-paralysis symptoms. For this reason, AD Police always wore gas masks during Boomer forensics.

"Hammer here. Ikuo, Jose—report."

A voice crackled back over the radio, filled with the static of the basement's public space. "It's a disaster down here, Pops. Every time I take a step, I'm tripping over junk. Can't see a thing... wait... what is—?"

"This is Bucks! Something... there's a monster! It's here! AUUGH!"

Gunshots rang out over the comms, followed by a blood-curdling scream. Hammer spat out his cigarette and immediately reported the anomaly to the comms van.

"This is Hammer! We have a situation in the basement! Bucks is down!"

"What? What's going on? The monitors are going haywire!" the comms officer shouted.

"Something's down there. I'm going in for Ikuo and Jose—"

"Wait! You need the Chief's permission—"

"To hell with that! My men are being killed! Send backup now!" Hammer roared. He drew his anti-Boomer assault pistol, loaded a grenade into the breach, and charged down the stairs.

He reached the public space—a 50-meter square abyss of pitch black. From the darkness came a mechanical sound he didn't recognize, followed by a human groan.

"Ikuo? Jose? Answer me!"

"...Pops... everyone's... dead..." Ikuo's voice came in a ragged, pain-filled gasp. "The bastard is... still here... Run... please... GWAH!"

The connection cut with the sound of a throat being crushed.

"IKUO! You bastard, I'll kill you!"

Hammer screamed, snatched an assault rifle from one of his remaining men, and unleashed a full-auto barrage into the darkness. The muzzle flashes illuminated the void as the roar of the rifle shook the room.

Hammer, usually calm and collected, was possessed by a primal fury. Ikuo was supposed to marry Hammer's daughter this autumn. Having been a cop for a long time, Hammer had hated the idea of his daughter marrying into the force—a life of danger and cynicism. He had joined the AD Police because hunting "mechanical dolls" felt less soul-crushing than dealing with human criminals. He had taken Ikuo under his wing, seeing a younger version of himself in the boy's fierce sense of justice.

Now, Ikuo had been slaughtered by an unknown "monster" in what was supposed to be a routine cleanup. Hammer cursed his own helplessness as his rifle finally clicked empty.

Silence returned, save for the hum of the damaged AC system. As a subordinate clicked on a portable light, white dust danced in the air like a mist, carrying the thick, metallic scent of blood. Through his visor, Hammer's eyes were dark and hollow, filling his remaining men with a cold, creeping dread.

They were standing in the center of the darkness, surrounded by the unknown.

Two terrified young subordinates crouched with their guns ready, scanning the area. The heavy thud of Hammer's assault rifle hitting the floor sent a jolt of pure terror through their hearts. One of them, still clutching Hammer's assault pistol, gingerly picked up the rifle and slapped in a spare magazine.

"Pops... is it over? Pops?" his voice was on the verge of breaking. "What happened? Did you get it?"

Hammer finally moved. He pulled off his heavy, grim helmet. His stubborn facial muscles didn't twitch as he spoke in a terrifyingly low rasp.

"It's still here. That rifle won't do a damn thing. Give me my gun. Listen to me: don't move. Stay absolutely still. Help is coming soon. Just hold on until then!"

The two trainees stared at him in shock, their bodies trembling so violently they couldn't find words. They were mere apprentices from a department with no combat experience, thrust into the heart of a nightmare. But hope

flickered—they heard the heavy thud of many boots rushing down from the floor above.

"We're saved!"

Ignoring Hammer's frantic command to stay put, the two bolted toward the sounds of the rescue party, disappearing into the dust-filled darkness where the flashlight beams couldn't reach. A moment later, a sickening sound tore through the air—the wet, heavy crunch of flesh being pulverized.

Rage and resentment scorched Hammer's brain once more. To lose two more men just as help arrived... his blood reached a boiling point.

"It's playing with us. It's enjoying this," Hammer thought, his face twisting into a mask of malice. *"It doesn't give a damn about the AD Police. Just wait... when this dust settles, I'm going to kill you. I'll tear you apart!"*

"Is anyone there?! We're here to help! Respond!"

The rescue team's voice boomed through a megaphone. They tried to cut through the dark with searchlights, but the floating debris reflected the light, rendering it useless. Hammer tried to shout back.

"It's Hammer! Don't come in! There's a monster in here!"

He screamed with all his might, but the roar of the damaged ventilation system drowned him out. The machine seemed to be lurking in the shadows, licking its lips, using the mechanical noise to isolate Hammer.

The rescue team didn't wait. They stepped into the hell of dust and the scent of blood. In that instant, a thick, murderous intent erupted between them and Hammer. A roar of madness shook the room, followed by the flashes of heavy weaponry and the screams of dying men, all harmonizing with the howl of the evil beast.

"They're gone. I'm next."

Hammer gripped his trigger with sweaty fingers, staring into the abyss of a screaming hell. Death was walking toward him.

"Even if I survive this... how could I ever look my daughter in the eye?"

That was Hammer's final whisper.

In District 10 of the "Inner District," a 21-story building stood out among the high-end shops. Its exterior was a masterpiece of aluminum cladding and artistic mirror glass. The penthouse resident was the mysterious beauty Sylia Stingray, and her younger brother, Mackie.

Sylia owned the building and operated the luxury lingerie shop on the first floor, "SILKY DOLL." Other shopkeepers in the district whispered about her—how could a woman in her early twenties own such a prime piece of real estate? They assumed some illicit dealings or a massive inheritance. But Sylia presented herself as a pleasant, easy-going owner, showing no trace of the shrewd businesswoman—and certainly no hint that she was the leader of the Knight Sabers, the vigilante group now rumored to be haunting the shadows of Tinsel City.

Sylia and the now 15-year-old Mackie were the children of Dr. Stingray, a scientist who had worked for a GENOM-affiliated lab and was murdered in a GENOM conspiracy. Sylia was only twelve and Mackie was five when their father died; how they survived and prospered since then remained a mystery.

Sylia knew the face of her father's killer. Fearing for his life due to his development of the O.M.C.S. (Over-Mind Control System)—a unique theory for controlling Boomers—Dr. Stingray had left Sylia several data disks.

They contained the blueprints for a revolutionary "Biological Brainwashing Element" and the record of his assassin: Brian J. Mason.

Mason was the man leading the intelligence wing of the super-conglomerate GENOM. He was a cunning genius who excelled in illegal operations and reigned over GENOM's darkest corners. Sylia hated the corporation that employed Mason. By hunting the Boomers that GENOM unleashed, she sought to appease her father's ghost and crush GENOM's ego. This was the motive behind the formation of the Knight Sabers.

"Priss has quite the hobby. I wonder if the live show is going well?" Sylia smiled to herself in the bath.

She relaxed in the hot water, her slender, toned body showing no signs of the fierce professional Boomer hunter she truly was. No scars marked her skin; her hands were delicate, her fingers long and thin. There was nothing in her physical presence that suggested the "savage warrior" of the Knight Sabers.

Stepping out and wrapping herself in a towel, she relaxed in a floor filled with feminine atmosphere and classic furniture. Healing music followed her through

the room via an automated audio system. Through the window, she could see the New Tower in the artificial Floating District—the headquarters of GENOM.

GENOM was too massive to be toppled by simple revenge. They were the world itself—insurance, transport, space development, weapons. And their most dangerous, most profitable export was the Boomer. Sylia's intellect had yet to find the definitive way to destroy them.

"Sis, are you there?"

Mackie's voice over the intercom interrupted the music.

"Mackie? Weren't you out on a date?"

"That doesn't matter right now... look, something's bothering me. Can you come down? Now?"

"What is it? Just say it."

"It's hard to explain... but I think we might have been found out!"

"Found out—?!"

Sylia quickly threw on a bathrobe and headed for the private elevator—a secret lift known only to the members of the Knight Sabers.

The building's advanced structure was a marvel of cutting-edge design, far surpassing anything around it. Of course, it was Sylia who had designed it—another one of her many mysteries.

The high-speed elevator reached the basement level in seconds, opening into a space that, at first glance, looked like a high-grade intelligent office. However, a closer look revealed rows of computer units, several custom motorcycles, and exoskeleton-type Power Suits with strangely erotic, curved lines. This was the secret hideout of the Knight Sabers.

Sylia opened the door to the inner sanctum, where Mackie was busy at a terminal surrounded by data collection devices.

"What happened, Mackie?" "Ah, Sis... I was messing with the system earlier, and someone attacked the guard system!" "Our guard system? Was it a job broker?" "I wish. But it was... weird."



"Weird how?" Sylia asked, deep in thought. "They didn't say a word after I released the shield. When I tried to trace them with a virus, it was completely devoured!" "Interesting. Was it just once?" "Yeah, just the one attack. Here's the log."

Sylia stared at the mysterious wavelengths on the monitor. She had absolute confidence in the fiber-optic shield she had built. To find someone with the capability to "kill" a specialized tracking virus was unbelievable. She felt a profound threat from this unseen visitor in the darkness.

"Mackie, switch the shield program to the backup and wipe all traces of this attack. We'll figure out a counter-strategy later." "Got it. And one more thing... the AD Police network is in total overflow. It's a mess in Districts 12 and 13. Looks like a serious Boomer incident."

Sylia took the receiver. The information she gathered was grim. A significant number of AD Police officers had been slaughtered inside Tinsel City Bank—six forensics members and over a dozen rescue workers. The culprit's identity was still unknown.

"I'm going. Mark me. I need to see what kind of 'monster' did this. If I don't catch the culprit, I won't be able to sleep tonight."

"Wait, Sis! This isn't even for money! Besides, someone said a Boomer was already taken down there." "Don't you think it's strange? That attack on our system, and now a 'monster' that kills too many people... I have a bad feeling about this. Mackie, get the Sky Carrier ready to pick up Priss and the others!"

Sylia moved to the equipment rack. These weapons and parts were all her own designs, developed by her shadow staff. She selected one of the four exoskeleton suits.

She called these suits "Hard Suits." They were nearly human in shape, specifically modeled with feminine silhouettes. To function, they required the pilot to wear "Battle Lingerie" against their bare skin. Through bio-feedback, this undergarment doubled the pilot's physical capabilities, while the Hard Suit acted as a mechanical multiplier, linking with the lingerie to achieve maximum power and speed. It was a masterpiece of Sylia's advanced theories.

As the Sky Carrier descended into the room, Sylia realized Mackie might be watching the monitors. She quickly covered herself and glared at the VTR camera. In the control room, Mackie gave a cheeky grin. Despite their complex,

almost haunting bond, these two were the core of the Knight Sabers—the group that put their lives on the line to deliver "Heaven's Vengeance" to evil.

Chapter 2: Combat Squad

"What a hellhole..." Daley muttered the moment he stepped into the basement public space of the bank.

Leon, leaning against a wall nearby, flicked away a cigarette butt. "Old man Hammer really drew the short straw on this one. Damn it... I'm not letting this thing run wild anymore."

Leon approached a young officer who was shivering as he wrapped gruesome remains in preservative cloth. "So, did you figure out what the 'monster' was after?"

The officer, pale as a ghost and fighting back vomit, stammered, "At this point, it doesn't look like anything was stolen." "Nothing? Hmph. And where did the monster go?" "I can't be certain, but we think it escaped through the parking garage below—"

"And? Did anyone give chase?!" The rookie officer finally lost the battle with his stomach and retched. Leon grimaced. "This isn't a playground. What happened next?"

"The pursuit team was wiped out in the garage. We believe the target escaped toward Point D-7 in the underground mall." "D-7?! That's a dead end. D-8 is under construction, so the path to Area E isn't connected. The bastard is trapped! Daley, get everyone on the exits from Area A to D. Use the helicopters to watch every underground entrance on Canal Street!"

"Got it, Leon. But what about you?" "I'm going back to the start on my bike. This is the moment of truth." "You sure about that?" "If I were sure, I wouldn't be working this hard. But my gut is screaming!" Leon patted his side.

Leon bolted out of the room. In an AD Police force that prided itself on scientific weaponry, Leon was a rarity: a man who moved by animal instinct and scent. In an era where everyone was poisoned by technology, Leon still held onto his "wild" side.

While the AD Police were elite warriors, their combat theories were often trapped in formulas and methodologies. To beat a Boomer—a "wildness" born of machines rebelling against man—one had to let their own wildness swallow their reason. Leon's animalistic intuition was his greatest weapon.

“A clever, cruel bastard has appeared. This isn’t just a Boomer. What’s its goal? Why the massacre? Doesn’t matter... I’ll rip its head off soon enough. For Hammer and the others. It’ll show itself again, and when it does, it’s my win.”

Leon muttered to himself as if to stay focused, the friendly face of his partner, Hammer, flashing through his mind. Tearing through the night streets of District 13 at breakneck speed, he soon approached the junction leading to Canal Street in District 12.

Point D-17, located roughly 25 meters beneath Tinsel City Bank, was a section of a massive underground city currently under construction as part of the post-earthquake urban development project known as the “Inner Ward.” This subterranean complex was divided into sectors A through G, each intended to be an independent residential area. Travel between sectors was supposed to be possible via the “Basement Express”—the Oekumene Underground Highway—or the CTM Linear Motor Car Lines 8 and 3. However, the reality was that even in completed areas, there were almost no residents.

Despite the lessons learned from the Great Earthquake, the public corporation’s reasonable sale prices and low maintenance fees weren’t enough to convince the people of this era to commit to a life underground. Consequently, the abandoned sectors had fallen into disrepair, becoming lawless dens for vagrants and criminals who slipped past the eyes of the strict authorities. Naturally, the underground highway remained closed, and the CTM lines carried nothing but freight. Canal Street in District 12 was a freeway running directly above Sectors A through C of this underground city. This meant Canal Street possessed access points to the underground highway and the CTM lines for those sectors.

If Leon’s hunch was right, the “monster” that vanished from Point D-17 would emerge at one of the access points in A, B, or C. That is, if the beast intended to cause another stir. But if so, what was its goal? The creature hadn’t stolen anything of value from Tinsel City Bank. An uneasy thought crossed Leon’s mind: was the appearance of this monster merely the curtain-raiser for some unspeakable incident? Until he knew the motive, his stubborn detective’s nature—the kind that would hunt a suspect to the edge of hell—would not be satisfied.

Above the junction Leon was aiming for, two portable Fire Bee helicopters dispatched by Daley were circling, patrolling the access point to Sector B. One was Unit 5, piloted by Gilbert; the other was Unit 7, piloted by O’Neil. They

orbited about 30 meters above the access points on both sides of Canal Street. Gilbert checked in with O'Neil occasionally. So far, there were no abnormalities. The city night was silent, as if the chaos at Tinsel City Bank had been a lie.

Looking down at the city, Gilbert saw countless twinkling lights. He overlapped the sight in his mind with stories of schools of bioluminescent plankton that supposedly lived back when the oceans were still healthy. With the hum of the rotors acting as a lullaby, he savored the comfort of drifting through the darkness above a sea of slow-flickering light. In this view, the "true" city—a massive technological hive overflowing with toxic emissions and waste—was invisible. The only thing marring his sense of floating was the sticky texture of the smog on his cheeks and mouth, an unusual amount that his night-vision goggles couldn't cover.

"We've got reinforcements!" O'Neil's voice crackled.

As if mocking Gilbert's pensive mood, a transport helicopter approached from the south, its large dual counter-rotating rotors spinning. It was the AD Police Emergency Deployment Transport—the VSI-710, commonly known as the "Dropper"—its twin turbine-shaft engines roaring. The VSI-710 drifted between Gilbert and the street, dropping a K-11 Anti-Boomer Armored Trooper near the access point. It performed a skydiving-style descent before the transport sped off toward Sector A.

"The Chief's playing for keeps now!" O'Neil's voice had a teasing ring to it. "Is he planning to use 'The Corn'? Isn't that a bit overkill?"

Gilbert sounded exasperated as he spotted the area-saturation proximity missiles mounted on the K-11's back. A K-11 team usually consisted of four units, equipped with eight line-of-sight tracking missiles, two 30mm rail cannons for piercing Boomer armor, a 45mm multi-purpose launcher, an 80mm rocket pack, and the missile nicknamed "The Corn." Even a single unit possessed enough violent destructive power to devastate a city block. When they were deployed, the streets became a battlefield. Gilbert worried about the sanity of maintaining order with such ferocity, yet he knew he was infected by that same madness himself.

Priss was on stage at the Concert house "HOT LEGS," performing "ROCKIN' THE BEAT." Driven by the provocative beat, Linna Yamazaki and Nene Romanova

were stepping on the floor, having shed their daytime personas as a fitness instructor and an AD Police data officer.

Mackie appeared with a mature look on his face, shouting to be heard over the music. "Is she done yet?"

"What can we do about it? Tell Priss instead!" Linna shouted back, leaning forward.

"Sylia is being weird! She promised nothing would happen today. Besides, we can't rely on reward money anyway!" Nene complained, her face flushed from dancing.

"I was against it too! But Sis said—" Mackie started.

"Sis, Sis... that's why you're not popular with the girls, Mackie!" Linna teased.

"That's got nothing to do with it! Besides, Linna, you're always the one getting played and dumped—"

Linna's face turned fierce. "Who said that?! Who told you I was dumped?!"

"Well, Nene said..."

"Wh-what! That's a lie, Mackie! I'd never say that. Right, Linna?" Nene stammered.

"I see. So you two were making a fool of me." Linna sighed theatrically. "Too bad. I was just about to introduce Mackie to a cute Chinese girl, and for Nene..."

"Really?" both asked eagerly.

"A girl named Irene...¹ and for Nene, maybe a handsome young doctor?"

"Wow, Linna, you're so kind! Is he rich? Does he drive a sports car?"

"Of course! But forget it now." Linna turned her back on them with a smirk.
Idiots!

She turned back expecting to see them disappointed, but instead found Mackie and Nene dancing wildly to Priss's song. "Ugh, you guys are terrifying!" Linna muttered with a sigh.

¹ Irene chang from episode 2 so this is episode 1.5

As the song ended, Priss sent an "N" sign with her fingers to Linna. Priss winked back. The music cut off abruptly, the stage went dark, and the trio vanished from the floor before the encore could even begin.

Inside the *Sky Carrier*—the Knight Sabers' dedicated transport jet—the girls were changing. The aircraft, piloted by Mackie, was currently tracking Sylia's signal over District 12.

"Leon was there again today, Priss. Anything moving forward between you two?" Nene asked with a sly grin as she stepped into her Hard Suit.

"Don't be ridiculous! Who'd want to be with a guy like that?" Priss grumbled, though her tone suggested she didn't entirely hate the idea.

"Oh, come on! Your 'Le-on' tells everyone at the station you're his girlfriend!"

"He can do whatever he wants! I only talked to him because he approached me at a drugstore once!" Priss snapped, sealing the locks on her suit with rough movements.

"I knew it!" Linna jumped in. "You've been obsessing over sexy lingerie lately. That's proof you're thinking about a man!"

"I've had enough! I'm going to go wild today!" Priss shouted, ending the conversation.

"Leon! Gates CT-06 and 07 have been breached. The target is moving toward the Floating District at high speed! Four Fire Bees are in pursuit!" Daley's voice came over the comms.

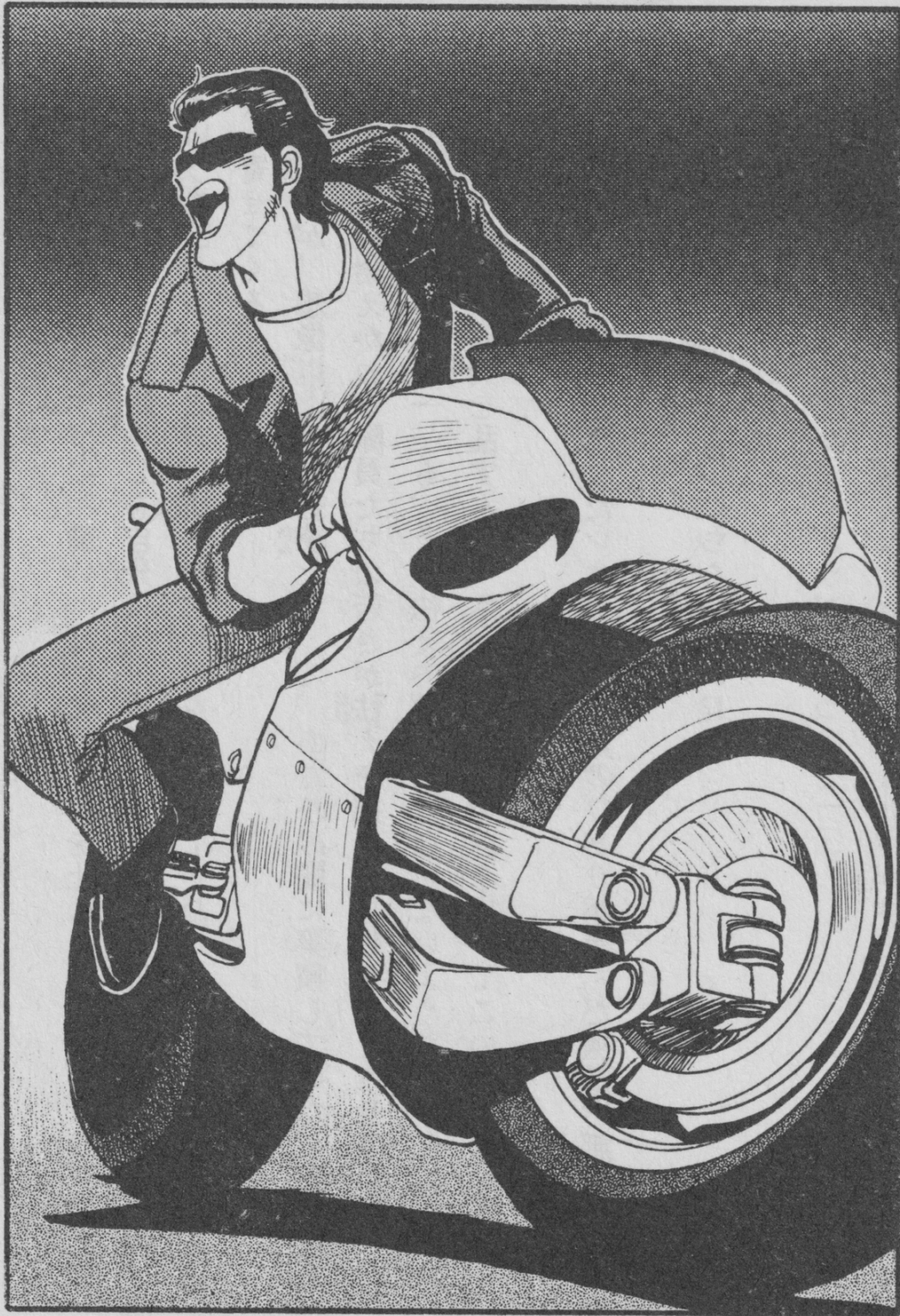
"Got it! I'm close, I'll intercept!" Leon replied.

Ahead of him, AD Police combat vehicles were burning, lighting up the night sky. The damage was severe. Leon tucked his driving glasses into his pocket and gunned the engine. He used a pile of rubble as a ramp and jumped his bike over the fence of the Canal Street overpass, dropping 15 meters to the road below. The impact made the bike's frame scream, but Leon's powerful muscles absorbed the shock.

I need to know what that Power Loader's after. Tinsel City Bank is GENOM's main bank... there's a reason for this rampage. Is it someone with a grudge against GENOM, or is something happening inside GENOM itself?

Leon wove through emergency vehicles and crowds with incredible skill. In the distance, the light of the GENOM Tower stood in silent, ominous contrast to the chaos below. He pushed through a disaster prevention tunnel and reached the boundary of District 11 and 12: Gate CT-09.

If his colleagues at the previous gate had managed to delay the monster for even a second, he would meet it here. His driving had been insane—covering 20 kilometers in under ten minutes through city streets. He was ready.



"Looks like I'm still in one piece!!"

Leon skidded his bike sideways with a screeching of tires, bringing it to a halt right in front of the gate. Through his goggles, he could see his fellow officers directing gazes filled with a mixture of relief and anxiety toward him. Reports from headquarters that various gates had been breached by "monsters" hung over them like a shroud of tragic gloom.

Eventually, terror began to surge from the far side of the darkness. The cruelty of that thing manifested as an atmospheric pressure far beyond anything imagined, accumulating in the shadows nearby. It was the weight of death. The youth of the officers made them unable to bear that weight; it invited cowardice and made their breathing ragged. Even their usual powerful ally, the K-11, didn't seem enough to dissolve that fear.

"You morons! Don't break formation! Hey, bring me a radio. And I'm taking the K-11. Get it ready!"

"...an armored Power Loader type. It is currently moving east on the freeway. Unit 7, O'Neill, is engaging, but the target is too agile—"

"Tch! Who's piloting it?"

"Unconfirmed."

"I see. And its weapons?"

"We've destroyed some, but it has two shoulder-mounted laser beam cannons, a smoothbore gun very similar to the ones on a Type-07 Automatic Paratrooper Tank, and a missile pod."

"Kuuh... I'll get revenge for..."

"If you want revenge, then cooperate! I'm heading out in the K-11 shortly to stop its movement. At the very least, I intend to take it down with me. While I'm latched onto it, you shoot the pilot. Got it!?"

"B-but, if you fail—"

"Me? I trust your aim. Don't worry about it, just do it."

"—But—"

The blood of further rage rose to Leon's head. Those savage emotions eventually settled deep within the armored suit known as the K-11.

"Better to attack than defend."

He awakened the "djinn" inside. As a mass of destructive energy boasting incredible power, the K-11 launched from the gate as if being flung out. An overwhelming sensation of acceleration hit Leon. This was the K-11's staggering combat performance. With tracking missiles on its shoulders and a 30mm rail cannon for anti-Boomer armor-piercing rounds in its hand...

"I've only got two minutes!?"

"You're soft, Gilbert! You can't take that thing down like that. At this point, it's a matter of settling the score."

Leon checked his fuel gauge. He had used a massive amount of fuel.

"He's a reckless bastard... alright, I'm at CT109 now. I'll use the K-11 to try and stop it. You guys—do it!"

"Sir! Understood!"

Leon, shouting to bolster their spirits, picked up the receiver of the portable radio one of the officers had brought over.

"O'Neill!!!"

"I won't forgive this!"

"Fire Bee! Fire Bee! Respond, this is Leon!"

"—This is Fire Bee, go ahead!"

"Hey, Gilbert, are you safe? What's the status of the target?"

"CT108 has been breached, and Hiro and Garfield from the first squad have been taken out. The target is a high-mobility..."

Suddenly, Gilbert screamed with a shrill, piercing voice, cutting off Leon's words. The sound of an explosion reached Leon's ears through the radio. Turning into a ball of fire, a craft slammed into a building several kilometers ahead in the city and exploded into a pillar of flame. Gilbert's grieving face floated in Leon's mind. O'Neill was Gilbert's best friend; they even shared a room in the barracks. They lived a carefree bachelor life together and were famous for how well they got along. But fate is a cruel thing.

"He's hit. O'Neill's been killed!"

"Calm down, Gilbert!"

"DAMN IT ALL!!!"

"Get a grip! Listen to me, Gilbert! Listen well!!!"

While O'Neill had met a sudden death, Gilbert had surrendered himself to a torrent of fury. Thinking of the deaths of so many comrades—Hammer, Bucks, Ikuo, Jose, Hiro, Garfield, O'Neill—

Having finished checking his various assault equipment, the K-11, equipped with its rear ram-jet and holding its rail cannon, entered combat mode. Maintaining a forward-leaning posture, it moved via hover over Canal Street, slicing through the air. Leon felt it—the pilot of the K-11 required a mental structure equal to a beast's. Just controlling the machine imposed a terrifying level of mental and physical exhaustion. On top of that, one had to go hunting for prey with insane destructive power like Boomers or this current monster. Only "guts" on par with a wild animal made the K-11 what it was. Grinding his back teeth, Leon went to full throttle to close the distance with the rapidly approaching enemy.

He's here!!!!

A small point of light from Gilbert's Fire Bee, flying at ultra-low altitude, became visible ahead. The light was a searchlight illuminating the monster. The Fire Bee itself was melted into the night darkness and couldn't be clearly seen. However, the presence of the portable helicopter desperately pursuing the monster was clear from the light that vibrated wildly up, down, left, and right. The sensors spat out the distance in digital display: "3000... 2800... Contact in less than 60 seconds!"

The fast-moving point of light expanded rapidly, and Leon could see it illuminating the area in a wide band. Occasionally, flashes from the monster's laser cannons returning fire showed the intensity of the battle. The ram-jet engine could only run for about five minutes on a full tank at full throttle. Because of its total weight of 1.4 tons, the top speed was limited to 120 km/h. Therefore, it was usual to move at 50 or 60 km/h to save fuel. Leon operated the radio in front of his face, which was emitting a faint hum, and called Daley at headquarters.

"It's me. The fireworks are about to start!"

"I'm listening. We've evacuated the residents in the area. Do as you please!"

"OK! Don't make me sad, alright?"

"Yeah. I won't be in contact for a while. I'm going to do this loud, so call me if anything happens!"

"Don't say such unlucky things!"

Leon stared at the black mass approaching rapidly ahead. From above and behind it, Gilbert's Fire Bee followed, bobbing in the wake. The Power Loader's small auxiliary laser cannons extended. Leon aligned his sights for the tracking missiles. A beam was fired from the Power Loader.

"Keh! Don't make me laugh. If I don't hold the line here, we're all wiped out—is it at 1080!?"

A different flash of light accompanied by a roar illuminated the entire area like midday. From the intermittent light and explosions, Leon felt a savage will behind him. A smokescreen rose up. As the fire turned to black smoke, the sensation brought Leon something akin to intoxication. His sensory centers, inside the K-11, were mistaking the machine's massive power for his own. Releasing that energy of destruction brought a certain kind of exhilaration.

The smell of scorched air triggered an "ecstasy" in the combatant. Before Leon could finish the words he spat out with his whole body tensed—"You bastard! You aren't dead yet—"—the thing slammed into him at incredible speed. A Roar of "Gaan!" echoed as heavy metal collided with metal.

"Gilbert, you're too close! Pull back!" Leon shouted.

Whether obsessed with the strafing run or not, the Fire Bee didn't stop its ultra-low flight.

"Damn it!!! Even though it's in tatters, it won't go down!" came Gilbert's growl.

"You idiot, get out of the way!"

Gilbert noticed Leon's voice. At that same moment, the Power Loader's upper arm snapped open.

"I got him!" Leon's lips tightened.

In his field of vision, like frames of a slow-motion film, Gilbert's Fire Bee fell beneath the elevated tracks while engulfed in flames. Leon's scattered consciousness solidified instantly. He snapped back to reality.

"Gilbert, get out! Eject, Gilbert!"

Leon's cry was in vain; a pillar of fire soon rose from the nearby buildings. Leon's entire body went rigid. "Gilbert!" He broke out into a heavy sweat. Exhaling deeply and regulating his breathing, he tried to recall the faces of his dead comrades. But nothing came to mind. Only anxiety and impatience filled his head. Leon screamed and pressed the missile launch button. The missiles ejected from the K-11 one after another, sucked toward the Power Loader. In that moment, a tremendous explosion...

"Kuuuh!"

A sound like the groan of a beast rose from Leon's gut, leaking from his mouth along with a spray of bloody phlegm. Intense pain ran through his entire body, making his skin crawl.

"Wooooah! Don't underestimate Leon!!!"

He threw a powerful straight blow with his remaining left hand, driving it into the Power Loader's chest.

Terror, dread, and emptiness froze Leon's body like a bad joke, plunging him into a state of intoxication for a moment. He stopped the K-11's movements and stared blankly at the scene before him. In that moment, the K-11's right arm—the one holding the 30mm rail cannon—was casually ripped off from near the joint. The Power Loader was nearly 1.5 times larger than the K-11. Its thick armor was crushed and peeled; it had taken enough damage that it should have stopped functioning long ago. Moreover, black smoke from burning oil was sputtering from various parts of its body.

But even while reeling slightly from the impact, its upper arm laser cannon was pointed at Leon. Furthermore, the Power Loader's rugged hands reached through the air, trying to rip off even his left hand. There was no waste in its movements. Fear and dread drove Leon to desperation.

"It's a bigger monster than I thought. If this keeps up, I'm dead!"

Determined not to let his remaining arm be torn off, Leon ground his teeth and formulated a plan.

"Alright!!!!!"

Leon suddenly fired the ram-jet engine at full throttle and, putting his entire weight into it, delivered a full-speed tackle into the Power Loader. The Power Loader took the full force of the impact and crashed into the freeway fence, pulverizing the thick concrete and falling below the elevated tracks. The Power Loader crashed into the junkyard about 20 meters below with a ground-shaking thud. The K-11 barely managed to hang onto the fence by its one remaining left hand.

"Serves you right!" Leon said with a defiant smirk, blood seeping from his lips. The rear ram-jet engine was making a sputtering sound as it ran out of fuel.

From the roof of a nearby building, Sylia was watching the fierce battle between Leon's K-11 and the Power Loader. Or rather, she perceived every detail of the battle via the hard suit's night-vision monitor and the gyro-sensors that served as the suit's vestibular system.

"It looks like a 2026-model GENOM-made GL-14 type. A Power Loader made for undersea plants... what are they trying to do by modifying it into this!?"

The identity of the monster spat out by the hard suit's micro-super-interface computer yielded no satisfactory answer. If the person who had accessed the computer at the Knight Sabers' secret hideout had any connection to this Power Loader chaos, she couldn't ignore it. Sylia wanted a logical conclusion to tonight's incident.

"Hmm!?"

The Power Loader, which appeared to have ceased functioning in the junkyard, resumed activity.

"What is this? It has a self-repair function!?!? How does it have the know-how of a C-series Boomer...?"

Spreading her rear wing thrusters, Sylia performed a graceful dance as she descended into the junkyard simultaneously with a rocket burst. Amidst the scrap parts and used cars left in the cramped yard, the Power Loader was attempting to move somewhere. Sylia landed right in front of its nose. Compared to when it fought Leon, it had grown about one size larger. It had transformed into something even more powerful. The pilot's eyes, like those of a mad beast, stared at Sylia.

Just as it took an offensive stance to leap at her, three shadows landed from the sky behind the Power Loader. They were Linna, Nene, and Priss in their hard suits. Sylia raised a hand and signaled the sky; the Sky Carrier that had transported Priss and the others flew off. The four of them fanned out to surround the Power Loader. Sylia spoke:

"We are the Knight Sabers. For what purpose are you rampaging?"

"Psheraaaa—"

An eerie mechanical sound like leaking high-pressure compressed air echoed. It seemed it was not fond of speaking. However, it bared intense hostility with its entire body.

"Fine. It seems we have no choice but to ask your body directly!"

Sylia's tone grew harsher. "Stop this pointless struggle and give yourself up!" Linna shouted.

During that time, Nene was trying to analyze the Power Loader with a high-performance scanner. The results of the cross-sectional scan revealed the presence of a human body with unfamiliar bionic organs inside the thick armored exoskeleton. She confirmed it was a cyborg.

"Special silicone on the surface. Collagen and natural polymers in the base layers!!! I knew it wasn't a normal human—" Nene announced to her comrades. Hearing this, Priss spat out the words with a defiant tone, as if she couldn't understand her opponent.

"What's the move, Sylia?"

"It doesn't seem like the type to listen to reason!"

Linna and Nene asked at the same time.

"For an old type, its movements are strangely polished. Formation SA (Destruction). We don't have time. You all want a hot coffee soon, don't you!?"

The four Knight Sabers slowly closed the distance with the Power Loader.

"We did it! That wasn't so tough. If the AD Police were having this much trouble with this thing, I worry about the future."

Nene said boastfully, crossing her arms as if the victory were her own doing. Sylia, Priss, and Linna approached the Power Loader cautiously.

"You bastard!"

Priss's voice was followed by a railgun attack. Her swift reaction smashed the laser gun. Taking advantage of the gap, Sylia flashed her laser sword again. The Power Loader's arms were severed from the shoulders.

"Sorry about that. I'm just not fond of... that sort of thing!"

Linna, going on the counterattack, delivered a fierce spinning kick to the body which was now geysering oil from the severed joints. Emitting blue-purple sparks from the destroyed actuator sections, the Power Loader hit the ground with a thud and overturned.

With a "pshuuu" sound of escaping compressed gas, the chest plate opened, and in conjunction with that, the various supports holding the cyborg inside the Power Loader detached one by one. The complex internal mechanisms were sparking and short-circuiting.

"This thing is a woman!!" Nene cried out in amazement.

Tearing away the tangled cords and wires, an eerie black cyborg crawled sluggishly out of the Power Loader. From the long black hair and the curve of the chest, it was clear she was developed based on a young woman. Her face, while showing traces of the Knight Sabers' fierce attacks everywhere, gave the impression that she had been an incredible beauty when she was a human. The four Knight Sabers stepped back slightly as they watched her. Sylia spoke:

"Where did you come from? What were you trying to do with the GL-14?"

The electronic eyes eerily embedded in the well-shaped face reacted to Sylia's words, and the pupils dilated dully.

"Come on, answer me!"

A slight trembling occurred in the cyborg's body as it crouched on all fours like a beast. It seemed some function was malfunctioning. The hard needle Priss had fired was stuck in her side.

"Can't you talk?"

"Danger!!! High possibility of self-destruction. Evacuate, Sylia!!!"

Nene's scream cut through her thoughts. The cyborg suddenly stood up and dashed furiously toward Sylia. Sylia gasped. At the very last second, Linna's rod cutter stopped the cyborg's movement. Following that, Priss used her

jump-assist verniers to leap and fire a beam attack. Losing everything from the left thigh down and having her chest destroyed, the cyborg tumbled and fell at Sylia's feet. She shook violently a few times, then completely ceased functioning.

Sylia squinted her eyebrows inside her helmet. It seemed she lacked that function. The imbalance between the abnormally developed muscle bulges under the black bodysuit and the face that maintained beauty even after modification... there was no point in prying deeply into her past. However, Sylia felt a surge of rage in her chest toward a society that could give birth to such an existence.

The Knight Sabers climbed into the craft one after another, led by Sylia. Linna, the last to step on the ramp, muttered with an unsatisfied face.

"She really put up a fight! That tenacity might be beyond a Boomer."

Priss said with a sigh.

"Wow! That really gave me a scare!!" Nene followed.

Sylia, speaking as if to normalize the situation, said, "This is Tinsel City. Nothing is too strange to happen here—now, let's not linger. Let's head back!"

The incident had been settled for now, but while sensing a new threat beyond her understanding, Sylia spat out words mixed with relief and anxiety. When Priss and Nene nodded at her words, Linna, who had been searching the area, said in a disappointed voice:

"There's nothing here, not a single cent! Sylia—are we working for free again!?"

"—Looks that way. That's why it's scary!"

"What do you mean by that—?"

"It means the climax is yet to come. Come on, let's go—!"

The Sky Carrier piloted by Mackie descended into the junkyard.

"I have no idea what you mean. What was tonight even all about!?"

Priss and Nene made a gesture as if to say "Who knows!?" as they looked back at the scene of the incident, hearing the sirens of the AD Police patrol cars in the distance. The time was a little past 2:00 AM; only about an hour and a half had passed since they deployed.

Leon, having escaped from the K-11 and looking down from the elevated Canal Street, was impressed by the Knight Sabers' performance. As they flew away in the Sky Carrier, the portable helicopter Fire Bee arrived late from above and drenched him in a powerful searchlight. Squinting as he looked up, Leon pointed toward the junkyard containing the remains of the Power Loader and the cyborg. The Fire Bee lowered its altitude and descended into the junkyard.

In the junkyard, amidst the miscellaneous scrap piles sputtering and burning, the destroyed Power Loader and cyborg lay there, telling the story of the fierce battle.

AD Police officers were pressuring the crowd of onlookers that had gathered from somewhere to facilitate the forensics team's investigation. Chief Arthur and Daley were among them.

"—So, Boss! Wouldn't it be more reasonable to think that a significant organization is moving behind the scenes?" Daley continued.

"The reason we struggled this much is because the computers at HQ and the branch offices both glitched at the same time! It's too perfect to be a coincidence—"

"God dammit, isn't it your job to investigate that! Honestly, with the target this mangled, what the hell am I supposed to write in the incident report—eh!?" Arthur screamed.

"Well, we did what we had to do—"

"Don't give me that! Between this and the VIX case, how many K-11s do you think you've trashed!?" Arthur, worried about the higher-ups, vented his gloomy feelings on Daley.

Just then, Leon arrived on his bike.

"Hello, hello, you two! Were you gossiping about how active I was? Man, look at these honorable wounds!!" Leon proudly showed off his scarred body.

"YOU MORON!!"

"WOW!!"

Leon mimicked being surprised by Arthur's hysterical shouting with exaggerated actions. Then, he said with a serious look:

"There's no use being angry—anyway, let's look forward to the forensics results. Daley, I'm starving. Let's go grab something to eat. Hop on!"

Leon jerked his chin toward Daley. Daley turned on his heel away from the angry Arthur and jumped onto Leon's bike. As the two prepared to leave the junkyard, Arthur barked at them:

"You've got some nerve—if you don't finish that report today, I'm gonna make you pay! DO YOU HEAR ME—!!!"

Pretending not to hear anything, Leon revved the engine and started the bike with a slight spin. Selfish behavior was one of Leon's defining traits. From the exit of the junkyard, the bike carrying the two of them sped off onto the wide street.

"I think you said that thing was based on a toy for undersea plants?" Leon shouted to Daley behind him over the engine noise.

"Yeah, a GENOM GL-1... from ten years ago."

"It's a modified GL-14 type, right!"

"How do you know that? We haven't even—"

"The Knight Sabers told me."

"The Knight Sabers? Then, didn't *you* take care of it?"

"Bingo!"

"Acting all high and mighty. So, how were they? Are they as strong as the rumors say?"

"They're quite something. At this rate, we might be out of a job soon. Hyahahaha—"

Leon continued with a vulgar laugh.

"Well, whatever. It just means the AD Police has backup. Let's think about our future while we eat—"

"A bright future for the two of us, right!"

"Yeah, and then we're gonna squeeze Mason at GENOM."

"Only someone like Mason would do something like this."

"It's happened before. Well, for him, it's a walk in the park. He likes being flashy."

Leaving the main street, they entered an unpaved road still under earthquake reconstruction and stopped the bike in front of a dingy restaurant. Because the owner of this restaurant was almost busted for PCP2 and Leon and Daley let him go, they were able to get free meals. Even detectives think of petty things sometimes; if it weren't for perks like this, who would want to be a detective? Things that would have been major drug possession cases 30 or 40 years ago had lost their impact in a world where cyborgs and Boomer "pseudo-humans" walked around. Leon's personal theory was that in the middle of a world where everything had gone so mad that it was no longer satisfying, those who wanted to die should just go ahead and die.

The "Floating District"—GENOM's building, the "NEW TOWER," towered over the artificial area of Sagami Bay. This marine city was supported by a massive foundation deep beneath the sea. On the seabed, many decaying remains of the National Development Agency's comprehensive undersea plant project—already forgotten by people—could be seen, symbolizing human selfishness.

The "NEW TOWER" was at the center of such a marine city, boasting an overwhelming presence as if keeping the other skyscrapers around it as attendants. And, gathering the best of macro-engineering, it was still being built upward toward the sky. Just as Leon and the others entered the restaurant, a large civilian helicopter flew in from somewhere and landed on the helipad near the top floor of the "NEW TOWER." Stepping off the helicopter was Mason—the man who once assassinated Sylia's father.

With a grimace as if he had chewed a bitter bug, Mason walked briskly and disappeared into the tower. He got on a floor escalator in the center of a vast corridor that looked to be about 20 meters wide. Showing his ID card, he passed through the secretary section and entered the vast Chairman's office.

The office was about 300 square meters, filled with high-sense, high-tech furnishings and various indoor plants that told of the owner's tastes. The dictator of GENOM, the super-conglomerate that straddles the world, Quincy, was sitting at a giant desk by the window. He was talking to someone on a visi-phone.

"As you say, M-Enterprises has dealt with the trade friction issue carefully for the last several years—moreover, it seems someone broke into a Citibank in

District 13, but we are currently investigating whether there is a connection here as well. Of course, we will promote it further. A retreat on this matter would mean the immediate acceleration of fossil fuel depletion—yes, the market share! Indeed. Even in automobiles alone, GENOM cars boast a 68.6% share of the world—very well. I will leave the construction to your company, as promised."

Mason gave a deep bow and walked toward the desk. He maintained a posture of standing at attention. Quincy, appearing not to care, continued talking.

"Military combat cyber-droids in foreign countries where localized wars are occurring? I will guarantee you the seat of the next Prime Minister... as long as you maintain a cooperative stance toward us. Ohohoho, don't worry!"

"The whereabouts of the GX-2 are still unknown. However, strangely enough, a similar incident occurred in our lab as well... yes, this will not lead to anything serious. If you could just provide... regarding the Bay Area fusion reactor construction plan, if we don't get parliamentary approval, it means the power grids of our country—no, the entire world—will collapse in the near future. Our GENOM..."

Quincy finished his call. Seeing him take a breath, Mason spoke.

Quincy, who had turned his back to Mason to gaze out the window at the Tinsel City panorama below, closed his heavy-looking eyes.

Quincy opened his eyes. They bore a sharp glint. But he continued to stare at the outside world, which was appearing and disappearing through the clouds. Finally, he spoke with a heavy voice.

"I have heard from the Director of the USSD. But, Mason!?! To think that even with your organization, you don't know whose doing this is—?"

"I am sorry. I will recover the GX-2 immediately."

"Umu. Mason, I will leave everything to you. But do not forget that our GENOM is a sound corporate entity!!! It is not desirable for the name of GENOM to surface even slightly."

"Yes, I understand."

Mason bowed and prepared to leave. However, he noticed a large woman sitting on a gorgeous sofa in a corner of the vast office and stopped, giving her a glance.

"Her name is Lowy. She is one of my secretaries. You should take her with you, Brian J. Mason. She will surely be of use to you."

An incredibly beautiful woman stood up abruptly and, upon turning around, threw a mysterious smile. Approaching Mason while swaying her lightly waved platinum-blond hair and her shapely hips, he stared into Lowy's transparent, cerulean blue eyes as if entranced.

Chapter 3: Conspiracy

"What's the word, Mackie? Did you find anything?"

"It seems to be one of the 1,012 units produced by Shelby Corporation, a GENOM subsidiary. They did a good job of scraping off the emblem to camouflage it, but it's easy to identify if you put it under an XD-Ray (Molecular Density Analyzer). They're idiots. Also, I can't say for sure just from the video Sylia-neesan and the others took, but the power source is an old-style dry-sump organic motor. Judging by the high-tuning marks on the port shapes and exhaust system, well, after the modifications, it probably put out power on par with a C-series Boomer."

"So, where were those 1,012 units delivered back then?"

"North America and South American countries took 500 units. Southeast Asia took 301, and Africa took 181..."

"...and in this country, only 24 units. Maintenance was all handled by Shelby, so based on the repair records since 2026, it's zero thanks to the appearance of Boomers. Currently, they should all have been disposed of as scrap."

"So, were there any here in Tinsel?"

"Wait—"

Mackie searched on the computer. He pulled an answer in seconds. He was a clever boy, a child of the computer age.

"Data remains for the undersea plant plan promoted by the National Development Agency's comprehensive project from Sagami Bay to Tokyo Bay, but there's nothing left regarding the GL-14. Probably because it was before the earthquake and it was insignificant data, it was likely scrubbed and deleted!"

"I see—"

Sylia, who had been silently watching the data on the monitor, whispered.

"N.D.P... huh?"

The two were deep in the basement of the building that housed the Knight Sabers' secret hideout, "SILKY DOLL." They were reviewing the contents of the video disk recorded by the hard suit's memory function during the battle

against the Power Loader cyborg. Sylia, who often looked thoughtful even on normal days, now looked even more cynical.

"Everything that can be logically understood has been done. But the monster's objective is unknown."

"Hmm? It's happening again, Neesan! Look, it's attacking the fiber optic shield!!"

"G-Mode On. Mackie, start the backtrace!"

The electronic sound of the computer terminal echoed as Mackie, with a practiced touch, searched for the mysterious light form appearing and disappearing on the monitor. Mackie's puzzled face reflected the complexity of the access. It was a rare expression of serious distress. After about 30 seconds, he suddenly let out a big sigh and slammed his fist onto the console board.

"Failed again! Sylia-neesan, the opponent is a step ahead. What should we do?"

"—It seems so. Then, delete everything as planned!!"

"But—"

"It's fine. Until we can confirm if our recognition function has gone haywire or if an opponent like the one you describe really exists, we have no choice but to keep it in a closed state."

"As I thought, the Catalyst's—"

"Right. We might need to check that out just in case!"

Sylia's face was grim as she desperately racked her brain. Her usual refined and beautiful expression was now inhabited by the fearsome intensity of the Knight Sabers' leader.

Early the following morning, Sylia stood at the edge of the Girly Pier in the "Flotation Zone," facing the open ocean. What exactly made this a "mega-technology industrial cluster"? In this gray town, suffering from severe marine pollution caused by the industrial waste of Tinsel City, cars and pedestrians were sparse. The sea had lost its azure hue, turning a dark, grayish-green. Sylia, wearing deep brown sunglasses and a chic one-piece dress, gazed out at the water.

The raucous engine sound of a small-displacement vehicle approached her; a commuter "AIBOUT Replica" turned from the coastal road onto the pier. It pulled up alongside Sylia's personal favorite, an Italian Red Ferrari 328GTS replica. From the commuter, a disheveled man in a worn-out coat stepped out. This middle-aged-looking man was Fargo, the Knight Sabers' hired "catalyst" (informant). He approached Sylia while letting out a strange, dry cough.

"You gave me quite a shock. Being called out personally by the 'Big Sister'—well, that hasn't happened once in the last few years. Heh heh..."

"Same as ever, Fargo. I thought you might have cleaned up your appearance at least a little—!"



With her blunt tone and the sharp glint in her eyes behind the sunglasses, it was hard to imagine Sylia's usual gentle expression. She radiated a harsh mood, like a female boss who had her subordinates dancing in the palm of her hand.

"Sorry about that... what with the high cost of living, and then there's all this trouble with the wife—"

"Still haven't fixed your womanizing habits?"

"Now, now, that's... well, let's not worry about that, ehehehe. By the way, is it true? What you said this morning—!"

Sylia looked at him with a suspicious expression, intently searching Fargo's face. Fargo looked somewhat uncomfortable. Eventually, Sylia took off her sunglasses, her expression softening into a faint smile. Fargo let out a sigh of relief.

"Give me a break. You're a scary person, truly—"

"It seems it wasn't you after all!"

"I see. Is the person you're looking for really that tough? I hope it's all some kind of mistake. Actually, I caught a strange rumor among my circles, and I thought it best to let the Big Sister know as well—hey!"

"Does it have something to do with yesterday's incident?"

"Well, I'll leave that to your speculation. But the truth is, around the time you were working, it seems a new model Boomer somehow escaped from USSD! On top of that, there's been some kind of trouble at several GENOM-affiliated labs!"

The fact that some massive conspiracy lay in the shadows of this series of incidents was no longer a matter of doubt. Playing with her sunglasses in her hand, Sylia turned her back on Fargo and gazed at the sea once more.

"Well—I'll be going then. I have to head to N·D·P now."

Sylia spun around as she asked, "N·D·P? Is that your next job?"

Fargo spoke as if he were trying to goad her. The moment she heard those words, Sylia's shoulders twitched. Fargo didn't miss it, and a smile flickered across his lips.

"Maybe. Will you take it? It's a big job, for sure!"

"For the sake of improving your standard of living—"

"Heheh, well then, I'll see you soon!"

"Well, I'm off—"

He quickly climbed into his beat-up commuter and drove away.

N·D·P, the Shelby-made Power Loader GLI-4, cyborgs, GENOM, and that mysterious sender! Who on earth is doing this, and for what purpose?

In the distance, the GENOM NEW Tower could be seen through the smog, appearing hazy.

"Are they trying to drive GENOM into a corner!?" Sylia put her sunglasses back on and walked toward her Ferrari.

"The clue to this incident might be at N·D·P. No, it must be."

The series of incidents that were deeply confusing even the genius mind of Sylia remained shrouded in darkness.

District 53 in the "Outer Zone" downtown was a residential area lined with old, grimy apartments. People from the "Inner Zone" looked down on this area as a "modern slum" and mockingly called the residents "Dusters" (a play on "53" which can be read as *gomi* or trash). The main thoroughfare running through the center of District 53 was Cabezas Street, and facing that street was a ten-story apartment building with reddish-brown walls. The nameplate at the entrance read "MAISON TONDO," giving the building a somewhat exotic atmosphere.

AD Police detective Leon lived in a room on the fifth floor of this "MAISON TONDO."

Around the time Sylia was parting ways with Fargo at the pier, Leon was huddled under a blanket, sleeping soundly. He was lying on a bed with a chipped pipe frame, still wearing the clothes he had on the day before. From the living room next to the bedroom, the visi-phone suddenly began to ring. It was a persistent call. The sleeping Leon rolled over several times at the sound, but eventually seemed to lose the battle of wills and reluctantly crawled out of bed.

Standing up, he pounded the back of his head with one fist and headed toward the visi-phone while letting out a large yawn. However, he didn't go straight to the phone. Along the way, he put a kettle on the stove in the small kitchen in the same room, went to the washroom to splash water on his face, and then finally

switched on the response button. Looking as though sleep hadn't quite left him yet, he stared down at the screen.

Daily appeared on the screen. She spoke in a voice that was full of drowsiness but still had a touch of sex appeal.

"It's about time for the shift change, Leon! It might be useless to keep staking out a place like this any longer."

"Yeah, yeah. I'll be there soon. Where are you now?"

"On 5th Avenue in front of the Tower's main entrance. It looks like your hunch missed the mark this time."

"Is that so... and what about that Mason guy?"

"Mack followed him, but it doesn't look like there was any significant findings. He's holed up at the 'ELECTOR HOTEL' with a beautiful woman. By now, they're probably sleeping soundly in a big, fluffy bed. Hey, Sam! How about we join them?"

"If a girl stops talking to me, then maybe. See you later!"

"How cold of you—" Daily said with a clingy voice.

When the visi-phone cut off, Leon ignored the boiling kettle and picked up a jar of instant coffee from the table, putting the damp, clumped powder into a cup. Then he turned off the stove and poured the whistling hot water into the cup. Sipping the hot coffee, he returned to the bed and pulled a micro-video cassette from the pocket of his jacket. This was the one he had brought from K-11.

He set the cassette into the deck and watched it on the bedside monitor. On the screen was the Knight Sabers fighting the Power Loader in the junkyard. After watching the cassette through once, Leon spent the next ten minutes finishing his coffee, playing it back several times, pausing, and zooming in, mesmerized by the monitor screen.

Around the time Leon was finishing his coffee and turning off the video deck, Sylia's Ferrari entered the underground parking lot next to "SILKY DOLL." Sylia stepped out of the Ferrari parked at one end of the lot. She headed for the elevator, waited a moment, and then got in. She pressed the button for the top floor. She was heading to the penthouse. Upon returning to her room, she changed into house clothes, thought for a while, and then made a visi-phone call. The person on the other end was Priss.

"That's how it is, Priss. I can't say that yesterday's events are unrelated to the USSD matter."

Priss appeared on the visi-phone screen. She looked more feminine than one would imagine from her usual temperament. The inside of the room visible behind her was cluttered.

"So, that's why it's N-D-P. But we just went wild, wouldn't it be dangerous if we don't stay quiet for a while?" Priss said, sounding a bit perplexed.

"Now that doubts have surfaced about the computer, we can't afford to say that."

"I guess that's true... Okay, then. I'll stop by the shop, pick up Linna, and head over there. Linna will probably be after work, so... mm-hmm, maybe I can make it by 5:30!"

"Please do. I'll get in touch with Nene."

"Gotcha—well, talk to you later."

With a sleepy voice, Priss disappeared from the screen. Priss was blunt, impatient, and tomboyish, but Sylia understood to some extent the essence that lay beneath her tough exterior.

Priss had lost her parents in a massive earthquake and was forced to wander the dark side of Tinsel City at a young age. The pain and sadness she tasted during her sensitive teenage years supported the Priss of today in a way.

Sylia, who also had no parents, understood Priss's way of life well. It was just that their ways of expressing it were different.

But now was not the time to be sentimental about the void in her heart. Life in Tinsel City was not that sweet.

The capital of the nation, boasting the world's number one advanced technology, had toyed with its residents from one extreme to another through drastic post-disaster redevelopment. Those with superior intellect secured their status in the computer society, lived in the "Inner Zone" with high rewards, and swept the world market as leaders of the technological innovation race.

However, ordinary people eventually dropped out and were culled from such a technology-first society. Oppressed by skyrocketing land prices, fierce inflation, and excessive consumption taxes, they were pushed into the "Outer Zone," where they crowded together. In their inescapable poverty, they had even given

up on dreaming. Heaven and Hell unfolded there. Beauty and ugliness existed visually, and society was divided into the ruling class and the ruled class.

Compared to the orderly, ultra-modern districts of the "Inner Zone," the "Outer Zone" was almost entirely slum-like. Hungry people with no hope drowned themselves in drugs and lewd pleasures, leading to spiritual decay. Young prostitutes stood in the garbage-heap streets, and children ran about begging.

Shoplifting and theft didn't even make the newspapers; the area was overflowing with disgrace and corruption.

Priss had survived in such an environment all by herself. Sylia was amazed by Priss, who had reached the present day without a ruined spirit, and she felt a sense of camaraderie in her strength. That is to say, Sylia had recruited Priss into the Knight Sabers, betting on her tough, indomitable, and positive mental strength. As the most reliable Hard Suit warrior—.

"Who are they? These 'Knight Sabers'?"

"You don't know?"

Mason looked at her with a slow gaze as Rowee continued.

"Don't you think that's saying a bit much?"

Rowee said with a smile.

In the center of the "Flotation Zone," occupying a vast site of approximately 2,387,000 square meters, was GENOM's "NEW Tower."; The Pyramid of Khufu from the Fourth Dynasty of Ancient Egypt, built around 2700 B.C., is only 137 meters high with a base of about 230 meters.

Compared to that, one can understand just how colossal a structure the "NEW Tower" is.

Daily was staking out the street in front of the main entrance of that GENOM building in an unmarked police car. Leon approached on his bike. Seeing Daily in a dozing state, Leon crashed the front wheel of his bike into the rear bumper of the patrol car. Startled by the shock, a sleepy-faced Daily poked his head out the window. *That jerk!*

"Thanks."

Leon took a paper bag from the bike's trunk and handed it to Daily.

"Well, I'll forgive you. Because this 'Hali-pig' (Hedgehog/Pig pun) is about to die of hunger."

He opened the bag and held a hamburger and a Coke in both hands, stuffing his face.

"Good boy. By the way, did Mason come back with the woman?"

"Phew, delicious—"

Daily said after finishing the first hamburger in an instant.

"It looks like he's still holed up at the ELECTOR HOTEL."

"Leon! If you're going to rear-end me, do it in bed."

Leon laughed and replied to the sulky Daily.

"Is that so. Well, he won't show his tail easily—"

"Idiot! You've got a terrible face yourself; you look like you haven't even been staking anything out. At this rate, you're not a 'Hali-nezumi' (Hedgehog), you're a 'Hali-butai' (Hedgehog-pig)."

"Don't you plan on giving up yet?"

"Yeah, this case smells just a little too much."

"I'm sure you became a Special Class-A officer because of your hunches, not your gun skills—" Daily's usual teasing came in.

"I'll hit you! But look, Daily, the big shots at the station are trying to settle this as just 'city gangs,' but did you know—?"

"Our computers are different from the average network ones."

"Exactly, that's why I'm doing this."

Daily finished his second hamburger, downed his Coke, put the cup in the paper bag, rolled it up, and tossed it into a roadside trash box.

From where Leon stood, Daily looked at his watch and said:

"Seriously, how long do you think it's been since I sent the report? I don't think GENOM is up to something bad, but even if they were, the opponent is just too

big. Being here and making excuses to the Chief is getting tiresome, and besides—this silence—”

”Those retired-into-private-sector guys (Amakudari) wouldn’t do anything that bold in the first place. But Daily, it’s worth a shot anyway. I’m going to try shaking GENOM up.”

”You must be joking! The boss gets furious just seeing us keep an eye on GENOM, so you should really stop.”

”Don’t worry about it. I’ve just decided I want to meet the big shots who are entrenched in a place like this. Leave it to me! Well then, Daily, you go back to the station first and smooth things over with the boss. I’m counting on you!”

Daily had an expression that said “I give up.” Leon got off his bike and walked quickly across the street toward the main entrance of the GENOM building.

The full scale of the GENOM building, which itself had become a city, was immeasurable. Once inside—though it was only one corner—the front lobby was crowded with businessmen from all over the world, moving about busily. Leon, in his grimy jumper, stood out from the surroundings, looking out of place.

Leon stood before an information vision set up in the center of the lobby for a while. On the screen, a map of the entire Tinsel City was displayed, followed by a completion drawing of the “Flotation Zone” (the artificial district where the GENOM building is centered) ten years into the future, as well as the full view and cross-sections of the “Flotation Zone” including the sea and seabed. Each screen was explained by a light-toned, unisex synthetic voice.

”—In this way, port facilities including a world-class container yard and a new international airport were built. Additionally, for the seabed foundations supporting this floating city, a soft-landing method has been adopted. As you can see, the cylindrical structures are sealed in the underwater section, serving as buoyancy tanks. In other words, the mechanism is designed so that the dead load of the entire city is offset by that buoyancy—”

Leon was nodding with an “I see” expression, but in truth, it was all Greek to him. He was weak when it came to difficult to explain things. After standing there for a while, Leon eventually showed a troubled expression.

”I’d like to know where Mr. Quincy is!”

Leon approached the reception counter with a carefree air. In order to find out the floor number of the Chairman's office, he stood before a beautiful receptionist. The receptionist replied with a suspicious look.

"If you say the Chairman, um, excuse me, but are you referring to our Mr. Quincy?"

"Yeah, that Quincy guy. I, I mean, my name is Leon McNichol—so..."

Leon snapped at the receptionist, then immediately put on a smirk, leaned his upper body over the counter, and whispered.

"AD Police."

"AD Police!"

"Yeah, the AD Police, the watchdogs of Tinsel City. Got it?"

"I don't have much time, so hurry up and tell me."

"Y-Yes. The Chairman's office is on the 406th floor, but, um—?"

"What?"

"Um, what about an appointment?"

"That's obvious, that's why I'm doing this! Well then, thanks! Oh, and you're looking sharp."

Before the blushing receptionist could finish her sentence, Leon was walking quickly toward the direct elevator. A guard was standing in front of the elevator. He stopped Leon as he approached. Leon told him that he had the receptionist's approval and to go check. While the guard was inquiring with the receptionist via portable phone, Leon slipped into the elevator. It was an ultra-high-speed elevator for VIP use only.

"This is exciting. People with money are really something else. Seriously!"

Leon's finger specified the 406th floor with a feather-touch operation. The elevator ascended.

Once the "NEW Tower" GENOM building passed the 105th floor, the entire view of the world's premier megalopolis could be seen through the reinforced smoked glass covering the elevator.

In the far distance, the ridges of the Japanese Alps were clearly visible. The GENOM building was at the center of the "Flotation Zone" connected to the land

by numerous freeways and undersea tunnels—that is, it was in the center of TOKYO Bay. The "Flotation Zone" was built at a total construction cost of approximately 42.2 trillion yen and was still being expanded with the momentum to cover all of TOKYO Bay. Most of the budget was covered by GENOM, and it was still under construction after about ten years using the finest technology of Japan's macro-engineering. With a surprised expression, Leon murmured as he gazed at the scars of the massive earthquake far below.

"Looking at this, anyone would forget they're human—tch! So that's why Mr. GENOM likes Boomers? Well, I can kind of understand the feeling!"

The elevator continued its rapid ascent. Eventually, the world outside the window turned pure white as it reached the clouds.

Sitting in a gorgeous chair in the Chairman's office, Quincy glanced at the multi-vision protruding from the desk. On the screen, the figure of Leon in the elevator was displayed. Before Quincy's desk, an elderly butler stood with an apologetic face. Quincy, seemingly unconcerned about Leon, switched off the multi-vision and stroked the cat on his lap.

"I-it will be arriving at this floor shortly. I am terribly sorry to show you something so... unpleasant," a small-statured butler said timidly, wiping sweat from his forehead.

"Hmph! Who is this?" Quincy's voice was heavy, yet sounded as though it were fading away. The butler recoiled slightly as he answered.

At the 406th-floor elevator hall, Leon was met by a sturdy man in a black suit who was clearly a Boomer at a glance. Leon tensed up for a second at the man's grim expression. The man spoke in a tone of polite insolence.

"Sir, this is an officer from the Special Task Force 'Experience,' commonly known as the AD Police. His name is Leon McNichol."

"Hoh, the AD Police, you say—"

"I have already arranged for security; I can have him removed immediately. However, since the Chairman's name was mentioned specifically..."

"It is fine. I shall meet him to kill some boredom. Stand down."

"But, if he should be disrespectful to the Chairman—"

The butler cringed under Quincy's sharp, intimidating gaze. "My deepest apologies. Then, I shall be the one to guide him in."

"Master Quincy is waiting. Please, step this way!"

Leon made a slightly disgusted face at how smoothly things were going, but he immediately regained his composure and cracked a joke at the man.

"Well, aren't you understanding? Yeah! Hey, Mr. Macho. How about you lead the way?"

The man glared at Leon. The butler stepped between them, restraining the man, and bowed to Leon.

"I shall be your guide. Mr. Leon McNichol."

Guided by the butler, Leon entered the Chairman's office. He spotted Quincy sitting by the window in the far back of the vast room. He strode up to Quincy's desk and spun around to scan the entire room.

Quincy continued to ignore Leon, occupied with stroking his cat.

"I see... when money transforms into something, it really becomes something monstrous, doesn't it, Mr. Chairman?"

Leon focused his gaze and directed it intensely at Quincy. Quincy, as if measuring Leon's worth, let his eyes glint and squeezed out a low voice.

"—Did you say your name was Leon?"

"Well, well, I'm honored the Chairman remembered my name so quickly."

Leon grabbed Quincy's cigar case from the desk, flipped the lid, took one out, and used the lighter on the desk to light it.

"Phew... This is top-shelf stuff. Oh? It's even got Chairman Quincy's name on it? A special blend from Havana, no less. I'd love to have some to take home later."

"An interesting man. So... do you have business with me?"

Blowing smoke toward Quincy with a feigned air of ignorance, Leon looked past Quincy's shoulder at the view sprawling outside the window.

"Nothing much. It's just that there's a mountain back in my hometown that stands tall just like this building, so I felt like climbing it a bit. While I was at it, I figured I'd like to see the face of the mountain's owner."

"And? Do you think you'll take a liking to it?"

"Maybe! ...Oh right, there's a sequel to that mountain story. They say a bear used to live there. A real ferocious one. Does one appear here too?"

Leon glanced at the man standing behind the butler. Leaning against Quincy's desk, he took one last puff and crushed the cigar into the ashtray. Quincy let out a faint, eerie smile. The eyes of the man in the black suit watching Leon flashed with murderous intent.

"Oh? And then?" Quincy prompted.

Leon spoke bluntly.

"To be blunt... that Power Loader your company made went on a rampage yesterday. The way it went wild was so magnificent that I just assumed it was a 'pet' born from your technical expertise that had accidentally slipped its leash."

Quincy sent a cold look toward the butler. Leon remained unperturbed by the man in the black suit. Quincy spoke again.

"I see. That incident with the Tinsel City Bank? We are quite troubled by it ourselves."

"Oh? And then?"

"We certainly manufacture Boomers, but I have no idea what you are trying to imply. This is a legitimate business conducted under national authorization."

"So you're saying you're always holding the 'safe' card, huh? Yeah, Mr. Chairman? How many politicians do you think could survive without you? I bet you know that better than anyone, don't ya? Heh!"

Quincy let out an eerie smile.

"Who knows? These things happen—puzzling Boomers getting involved in these kinds of incidents..."

"Listen, Leon. On the lower floors, there are some quite interesting shops. Since you are here, why not enjoy yourself before you leave? Let an old man like me show you some hospitality."

Leon, who was always quick with his tongue, shouted at Quincy just before being dragged out of the room.

"Think you can play me for a fool! Hey, Mr. Chairman! Tell this guy—"

The man in the black suit, who had crept up behind him, grabbed Leon's shoulders with immense grip strength. Reflexively, Leon threw an elbow at the man to shake him off, but the man didn't even flinch.

"Enough! Refrain from such rough behavior! You have a lot of spirit, I'll give you that. It was a pleasure meeting you. Let's meet again sometime! Wo-ho-ho-ho!"

Quincy's laughter, full of admiration, echoed as Leon disappeared behind the thick doors of the Chairman's office.

"Seriously, showing up at the top of GENOM without even a search warrant—if word gets out, it'll ruin our business! Listen! As long as you're eating here, follow the rules! If you can't, leave your gun and get out!"

Chief Arthur shouted, literally foaming at the mouth.

This was the headquarters of the Special Task Force in the center of Tinsel City's "Inner Zone" and "Outer Zone." The official name was "Experience," but for a long time, people had called them the "Advanced Police" (AD Police). Several freeways ran nearby, making it easy to travel to other ring roads surrounding Tinsel City.

Inside the building was the detectives' squad room. Chief Arthur sat at a desk buried under piles of documents, restlessly puffing on a cigarette and venting his frustration on Leon. Leon, showing not a shred of respect for his superior, responded with a defiant attitude. Around them, Daily and other detectives sat at their desks, watching with smirks.

"I told you a dozen times! I just dropped by to ask where those goods came from!"

"Oh, aren't you a piece of work! Leon! Do you have any idea what kind of flak I'm catching? Superintendent Sullivan from headquarters called me and told me to get down there tomorrow because of you! Who the hell do you think you are!?"

"It's already decided! I'm gonna keep hunting Boomers until I'm sick of it, and then I'm gonna haul in the guy pulling the strings!"

"Oh, I'm shaking! I get it, you're the boss! Advanced Police, Rank—"

Leon continued in an aggressive tone. Arthur held his head, exhausted, and cut him off.

"I know what you're trying to say. But the opponent is GENOM. Even you know that the Tinsel City Bank is GENOM's main bank, don't you?"

"I know that! But Boss, their methods are always like this. They wouldn't hesitate to kill their own parents for the sake of the company—they're all basically Boomers! Hmph!"

Arthur was exasperated by Leon's intensity, but he calmed down slightly.

"How many years do you think I've been making a living doing this? You think you can win a fight against this city—no, this country? If you want to keep your body in one piece, don't even go for a walk outside!"

Arthur flared up again and raised his voice. He was a man of volatile emotions.

"A punk like you giving me backtalk! Get out of here, you brat!"

Leon, looking like he'd won the argument, gave a wink to Arthur and then jokingly played the fool.

"Special Task Detective Leon McNichol, from here on, acting toward civilians under the Police Charter—"

"You really are an insufferable bastard! I get it! I've had enough. Go write your incident report and turn it in!"

"I'm honored you understand, Boss."

Leon gave Daily and the others a wink and left Arthur's side.

"Good grief. Even the Boss is a pitiful sight when up against 'Lord Leon'."

"That's just how it is. He's surprisingly tough, so he'll find a way to navigate headquarters just fine."

"Still, it's a ridiculous story. The reason headquarters is so scared is fundamentally because of how the AD Police were founded. GENOM created our jobs as a side-effect of making Boomers!"

"It could be one of the Seven Wonders of the World, but that's none of my business."

"Exactly! It's none of my business. I'm living for myself!"

Leon pulled his Ruger from his holster and showed it to Daily.

"Cool! But what about the disciplinary action? You've piled up quite a tab, haven't you?"

"At most, a two or three-day vacation. They won't let me rest for long anyway. After all, this is Tinsel City! Now then, let's grab some lunch, Daily!"

Cracking jokes, Leon and Daily left the squad room.

They headed to the AD Police cafeteria in the basement. It was nearly full. Leon and Daily talked about various things as they carried their self-service trays and took seats side-by-side at an open table. Their conversation didn't stop even while eating.

Across the table from them sat a group of young female officers in sharp communication unit uniforms, also engaged in lively conversation. Among them was Nene.

"—And so, that shop is in District 55 downtown—"

Perhaps because of his hasty eating, Leon's words were muffled by a mouthful of food.

"—It was a p-pretty cool place. Gulp. Always a d-demo... but I only went four or five times and I found the p-perfect place to hide out!"

"Is there a hot guy?"

"Of course! Gulp. He was like, th-this big!"

Leon put down his fork and knife and used both hands to mimic large breasts over his own chest.

"Wait, then that's a girl!"

"Ugh! Oh? Right! Wrong one!"

"You're so mean, Leon!" Daily poked Leon in the side with his fork.

"I surrender, I surrender! Anyway, the live performance was great. There's this girl named Priss, and she's got... style! Yesterday she was especially on fire—"

Priss's name suddenly hit Nene's ears. Startled, she spilled the soup from the spoon she was about to put in her mouth. Nene tuned out her colleagues and began eavesdropping on Leon and Daily's conversation.

"You're weird! So, what's so great about this 'Priss' girl?"

"Her edge... how do I put it? She's just my type. Plus, the name 'Priss' has a nice ring to it—"

Leon smirked proudly with a silly look on his face.

"What's with all this 'Priss, Priss' talk? Leon! I'm your partner. If you keep chasing after girls like that, I'm telling the Boss—"

"Come on, it's fine! It's just a breather. I'll take you along next time—!"

Nene, who had been listening to their exchange, plucked up her courage to speak to Leon. Leon looked at her with an expression that said, What does this kid want?

"—Um, Mr. Leon, do you know Priss?"

"Oh, sorry for interrupting your talk. My name is Nene, I'm an operator."

"Oh, I know you. What, you too?"

"I go there sometimes. To 'Hot Legs!'"



Leon, delighted, patted Daily on the shoulder.

"Daily, we've got a comrade here! Hey! So, Nene, was it? Do you know Priss well?"

"Yes! Ah, well, a little bit—what about you, Mr. Leon?"

Startled by Leon's directness, Nene pressed her thumb and index finger together and blinked. Leon put on a show of vanity.

"Not me. I just hear she's performing, so I drop in once in a while. Oh, don't get the wrong idea. I'm just looking out for her a bit."

Daily made a face like this was ridiculous. Nene, while exasperated by Leon's blatant lies, felt like teasing him and continued.

"Could it be... Mr. Leon, are you Priss's boyfriend?"

"Whoa, now. Don't go introducing me to people like that. She's... sensitive about her private life. She's the type who treasures her privacy. But, well, I guess you could say that. Some people might call us that—"

Disgusted by Leon's pack of lies, Daily ate his meal in silence. Nene was starting to read Leon's personality; she struggled to suppress her laughter and kept leading him on.

"Then, please! I'm a huge, huge, huge fan of Priss! Do you think you could get me an autograph?"

"Oh, sure, sure. I'll get it eventually. Even I've been so busy with this string of weird incidents that I haven't been able to spend much time with Priss. Even yesterday our date was ruined. But I'll ask her when the time is right!"

"Whaaat! You were there yesterday too?! So, how was the show? Was there a cute girl in Priss's backup band?"

"Oh, her? She was just decoration. Compared to Priss, she's a total potato, a real scrub, what a nobody!"

Leon spoke with a dismissive air. Nene's face tightened for a second, but she quickly covered it up.

"N-No, I just heard from a friend that there was a cool backup singer—anyway, was that 'weird incident' you mentioned the one with the City Bank?"

"Yeah, exactly! You see, Nene chan—my little lady..."

Leon continued as Nene playfully acted huffy.

"My Priss was furious! I stood her up for a date because of work. But man, that gang was as scary as a bunch of Boomers. Though they were done for once they ran into me and Daily!"

Daily was fed up with Leon's tall tales. Give me a break, you big liar!

Nene was also annoyed, especially about the "date with Priss," but she endured it and acted impressed.

"And? Just now I was upstairs getting showered with praise from the Chief. Well, it happens all the time, we're used to it!"

"That's amazing! I really respect you, Mr. Leon! So, what happened to that gang?"

Nene tried to change the subject to find out if Leon and the others had caught any leads.

"Hey, hey—Nene-cahn, you're an operator here, right? Don't you know Nene-chan? Me and Daily took 'em down so hard they're nothing but scorched scrap now. Well, what we found out is that it was a GENOM-made Power Loader—you know, the machinery for undersea plants. And a cyborg was—"

"Excuse me, please don't call me 'Nene-chan.' I am a grown lady! I took paid leave yesterday, so—"

Daily, realizing Leon was too absorbed in talking to Nene, stood up without saying a word.

"Sorry, Gotta go! See ya!"

"Hey, wait up, Daily!"

Nene put on a fake smile and watched them. Leon tried to chase after Daily.

"What is with you? Flirting with a girl from the station like that. You look like a moron! You're such a skirt-chaser."

"Come on, it's fine! I'm under a lot of stress. Well, I don't think you'd understand even if I told you?"

Leon let off the parking brake and stepped on the accelerator, starting the Road Chaser.

Daily walked through the parking garage on the third basement level of the AD Police building. Leon followed behind. They were heading toward the patrol car, a Special Task vehicle called the Road Chaser.

Leon's gestures were strangely comical as he made excuses. The two of them climbed into the Road Chaser. Leon sat in the left-hand driver's seat, and Daily was in the passenger seat.

"Hmph!"

"We did that much. If GENOM is up to something, they'll show their tail eventually. Right, partner?"

Daily was sulking, acting as if he didn't care anymore. As Leon turned the ignition key to start the car, several AD Police officers carrying heavy weaponry ran past the front of the Road Chaser toward the parking exit. Something must have happened somewhere. The air was filled with a frantic, lethal tension. The two of them watched the scene as if it were someone else's problem.

Leon pulled out of the AD Police building and onto Sabrina Street. He watched the downtown scenery flowing past the car window—grimy, yet overflowing with vitality.

He switched on the car's visi-phone and contacted the station.

"Unit 13 here. Current location: Point B-12. Planning to head toward Chinatown."

"—Acknowledged—"

"Oh! You're a face I don't recognize. A rookie? What's your name?"

A young operator appeared on the visi-phone monitor, blushing as she replied, "I'm Sandra Paloma."

"Heh... Hey, when did you join?"

"—T-this is improper. No personal talk—"

Leon tried to continue the conversation, but the operator suddenly vanished from the screen. Leon persistently pressed the call switch. Daily glared at Leon with a look that said, You never learn. Leon turned toward Daily with a gesture that said, It's just a joke.

"When insensitivity goes that far, it's almost impressive, Leon!" Daily said with a deep sigh.

In Princess Park, a resort area in the Sagami Bay area, a cute trailer house was parked. From the lettering on the side of the vehicle, it was clear that it belonged to Priss.

The door opened, and Priss emerged in a riding suit, carrying driving gloves and a helmet. She climbed onto her favorite bike parked nearby—a brand new Honda NR-X900RR, V4 DOHC 5-valve with liquid drive. After putting on her gear, she turned the ignition key and revved the engine a few times. With a vigorous power slide, Priss took off toward the Southside Freeway coastal road.

Priss's bike rode through the sea breeze of Sagami Bay, producing a pleasant sound. After riding for a while, she entered a parking area. Because it was far from the city center, there were few cars. Priss parked her bike in a suitable spot, got off, and took a deep breath while stretching lightly.

Then, she ordered a hot coffee and a hot dog from a coffee stand. Sitting by the roadside and looking at the scenery, Priss had a refreshing expression on her face as she ate her light meal.

"—THANK YOU! Marcos, let's catch up sometime—"

Priss relaxed for a short while, but soon a group of motorcycles with cut mufflers roared in. A biker gang. They were a noisy, boisterous bunch. Three of the youths, dressed in heavy metal-style costumes, took notice of Priss and her bike and began crowding around her. A short man with a mohawk and a missing front tooth spoke up.

"You've got a bike I haven't seen before!"

A man with a skinhead that didn't match his sweet facial features put his hand on Priss's bike.

"Whew! A brand new Honda. This yours? —Eh?"

"Don't touch the bike!"

Her voice held a strange, hidden intensity. Facing the bikers, Priss remained completely unfazed, which caused the three of them to suddenly adopt an aggressive, loud-mouthed tone. To make matters worse, the rest of the gang

nearby began to get worked up. A fat man wearing a headband straddled Priss's bike to provoke her.

"This thing must've been expensive, huh? Why don't you trade it for mine!"

"You must be rich—"

"It's fine! Big sister here is very rich—heh heh heh." The mohawk man said in a voice meant to be overheard, his eyes glimmering with malice. With a cold expression, Priss jerked her chin upward in a threatening gesture.

"How many times do I have to tell you? Scram!"

The fat man with the headband ignored her. Priss swung her helmet in a flash, striking the mohawk man behind her, while simultaneously delivering a swift kick to the headband man.

The rest of the gang stood dazed. Priss's unexpectedly seasoned fighting stance only served to further infuriate the mohawk and headband men. Hurling unintelligible bellows and foul slang, they slowly closed in on Priss from both sides. Priss calmly took her stance. Just then, a deep, thick voice called out from behind the watching gang members.

"I'd expect nothing less from the woman my buddy fell for. Priss! It's been a long time!"

It was the leader of the biker gang, Marcos. Wearing a flashy leather jacket, he stepped in between them.

"Marcos!"

Priss recognized Marcos and let out a faint smile.

"You remembered me? Thanks."

"Same as always, huh? You look like you've lost some weight."

Marcos, a man with a solid, sturdy build standing well over 180cm, laughed.

"And you, Priss—I didn't expect to run into you in a place like this. Heh... Forget about those guys! They're not even worth playing with. I enjoyed the show, though."

"You're lucky to be surrounded by such 'reliable' friends, Marcos! You haven't changed a bit."

Priss gave Marcos a look that said, "You've got me."

"What are you doing these days?"

"What else is left for me but singing—"

"So, you're singing in Tinsel? Is it at the one in District 55, 'HOT LEGS'?"

"Tinsel's a first for me! Have you been there long, Priss?"

"Maybe a year... just as much as I've aged—"

Remembering the old days, Priss gazed out at the sea as if escaping Marcos's stare. Then, she turned back and opened her mouth.

"Well, as long as we're both healthy, that's what matters. Come by if you want. I'm better than I used to be. Not today, but I'm always performing!"

"I'm definitely going! HOT LEGS, huh? I think I might start liking this city!"

Priss shrugged and put on a smile.

"I just hope you aren't disillusioned—"

Priss put on her helmet, started the engine, and revved the throttle. Watching her, Marcos's expression was that of a man delighted to reunite with a lover. As the engine roared loudly, Marcos shouted:

"I'll definitely be there!"

Priss seemed to have trouble hearing through the helmet. "—What?"

"To hear you sing!"

Marcos called out to the three men and made them apologize to Priss.

"She's an acquaintance of mine. You morons, stop acting like half-assed tough guys!"

"S-sorry about that. We didn't know—hey!"

The three men, who looked surprisingly amiable when inspected closely, bowed their heads in unison. Priss rode out of the parking area. It was slightly past 2:00 PM.

Meanwhile, at the sky lounge of the ELECTOR HOTEL, Mason and Houri were having a late lunch by a window overlooking the ultra-modern "Technoscape" of the floating district.

Houri, wearing an enchanting white knit top, a pale rose jacket, and a tailored wrap-around skirt, sat beside Mason, who was in a well-fitted dark suit. Perhaps exhausted by a sweet affair with Houri, Mason ate heartily, while Houri stuck to a soft drink. An elderly waiter in a British-style uniform approached and whispered something to Mason. Mason gave a command, and the waiter bowed politely before retreating.

The waiter soon returned with a wireless phone, bowed respectfully, and withdrew. Mason picked up the phone.

"—It's me. What's the situation?"

"My apologies for interrupting your meal. We have located the GX-2—"

It was a report from a subordinate tracking the GX-B series space combat Boomer, which had escaped from the USSD Space Military Development Center. Mason's eyes gleamed as he paused his meal.

"Where is it?"

"Inside a cold storage warehouse in Block B of Pronton. I currently have my subordinates and Maggie Mae staking it out, but I would like to receive further instructions—"

Mason spoke with a faint, eerie smile.

"And? Has it noticed our movements?"

"No, sir!"

"Do not make a move until I arrive! I'm heading there immediately."

Mason cut the wireless phone and wiped his mouth with a napkin. Houri watched him with a sinister smile.

"Finally, it's showtime. Let's see your skills in action, Mason."

Mason called the waiter, settled the check, and the two stood up. They left the restaurant at a brisk pace.

Mason's favorite car, a W.O. Bentley replica, sped down Christopher Street toward the Pronton industrial zone in northwest Tinsel City. In the elegant Connolly leather backseat, Mason smoked a cigarette while thinking, Houri relaxing beside him.

"Oh, I'll treat it with as much 'affection' as I treat you."

Behind the Bentley, AD Police Detective Mack's car followed them.

"So they were here?"

Driving a beat-up GENOM sedan, Mack used the car phone to call Leon and the others. He looked quite sleepy.

"You pulling a muscle on this stakeout, Mack?" Daily's voice came through.

"Unit 13 here. Hey, Mack!" Leon's voice cut in.

"Heh! Stop it, you're grossing me out. I might look like this, but I'm not so jaded that I've become 'AC/DC' [bisexual] yet."

"Tell Leon that the guy is currently in a fight with some kids."

"Kids? Where are they?"

"Chinatown, Carranzan Street. It's so embarrassing, I could die. The AD Police have really hit rock bottom—"

"Think about how I feel! Tell Leon to send some girls my way! I'm completely bored over here!"

"The target is heading north on Christopher Street. Looks like he's going toward Pronton."

"Really?! Well, let me know when you reach your destination."

"Got it. Maybe it's nothing. If it turns out to be just a drive, I'm gonna be depressed."

Feeling the weight of his thankless role, Mack cut the car phone with a bitter smile. In fifteen minutes, the vast strip of industrial facilities in Pronton would be in sight.

Inside a Block B cold storage warehouse—a GENOM subsidiary storing photosynthetic bio-products at ultra-low temperatures—the Boomer GX-2 stood silently. The room temperature was -45°C. In this extreme cold, which would normally deactivate a standard Boomer, this brand-new B-series cyberdroid—equipped with advanced self-recovery and matter-fusion functions—awakened as if controlled by someone's will and began a new mission.

As the GX-2's internal organic motor started, heat was expelled, and the ice covering its body evaporated instantly, creating a dense screen of steam. Glowing with eerie red double eyes, the GX-2 began to move toward the exit.

Pronton was a relatively new industrial zone developed over 25km along the Naguri Valley of the Chichibu mountain range. With capital from the state and GENOM, it produced various products applying genetic and electronic engineering. In Block B, where genetic engineering allowed mass production of cloned flora and fauna, the facility had become the "stomach" of Tinsel City. The cold storage warehouse was the "kitchen."

Now, as the GX-2 woke, Mason's subordinates—the humanoid-type Boomer (BU-55C) Araiya and the humanoid-types Paja and Naja (BU-44C)—were maintaining a state of high alert at the entrance. They were staring intently at the video monitors.

The temperature sensors on the monitor had been fluctuating wildly. Something had happened inside. However, the video feed was white as if covered in fog, making it hard to see.

"Has the target started moving?" Paja asked, checking the monitor.

"No big deal. I don't know what this GX-2 is worth, but they even called in Maggie Mae, that dog from the illegal assassination squad. Personally, I think it's overkill. Has the Boss lost his edge?" Naja spat out insolently.

"Stop babbling and inform Master Mason immediately!"

"Oh, 'Mason, Mason'—I don't get why even you, Paja, have to suck up to a mere human."

"I don't give a damn. I've never even met him. All I know is he's the human who stands above us!"

Naja switched on his portable phone to call Mason. While the two looked away from the monitor, the GX-2's blurry silhouette appeared on the screen, its two eerie points of light shining like a mirage.

The two points of light began flashing rapidly. Just one thick steel door away from the GX-2 stood Paja, Naja, and slightly further back, Araiya and Maggie Mae. Mason answered Naja's call.

"This is Naja, under Araiya. It seems the target has begun activity. Shall we take it down?"

"Don't be in such a hurry. I'll be there soon. Keep it locked inside the warehouse!"

"Understood."

Naja cut the portable phone. Don't mess with me. Why should someone like me bow to a mere human?

Just as the arrogant Naja turned to vent to Paja, the steel warehouse door began to melt and collapse from high heat. It happened in an instant. There was a sharp sound of air being sliced, and then Paja's head went flying through the air and dropped at Naja's feet.

Naja reflexively took a combat stance. Crying out in shock, he signaled Araiya and Maggie Mae. The GX-2, emitting white steam from its body, confronted them with a ferocious, sharp gaze that radiated bottomless power.

This is impossible. This thing is different from our kind. I'm going to be killed.

The moment Araiya saw the GX-2, he knew it intuitively. As cyberdroids, the superiority of their specialized functions was everything. Even for a C-series combat Boomer like Araiya, the intense rage overflowing from the GX-2 was terrifying.

Maggie Mae had a question. What was the GX-2 trying to communicate? But that was as far as it went. Araiya and Naja, possessed of only simple thought centers, couldn't withstand the tension of fear and launched an attack. The GX-2 lightly dodged Araiya's beam.

The beam destroyed the cooling gas processing unit of the warehouse, causing a massive explosion. The GX-2 counterattacked. It closed in on Araiya and Naja with unbelievable speed. That was the last time Maggie Mae saw them moving...

Mack, following the Bentley carrying Mason and Houri, saw the explosion through his windshield and contacted Leon and Daily on the car phone. After mediating the fight between the youths in Chinatown, Leon and Daily were patrolling Park Row Street in District 75 of the "Outer Zone" in their Road Chaser.

"What?! And Mason?" Leon's voice came loudly through the phone.

"We're heading there at full speed!" Leon had suddenly become excited.

"Something happened in Block B of Pronton. That bastard Mason is heading there. We're rushing over too!"

"What?! Don't go without me!" Daily's voice intervened.

"What about the station?" Daily asked Leon suspiciously.

"Someone will tell them. Besides, that place is GENOM territory, right?"

"Hey, keep the office talk to yourselves," Mack said. "If I don't have proof, I'll just catch the Boss's anger again. Anyway, I'll see it through, so get here early—bye!"

Mack cut the car phone, left a little distance from Mason's Bentley, and stepped on the gas.

The Bentley slid to a stop in front of the exploding, burning warehouse entrance. Mason and Houri stared at the aftermath of the fierce battle. The gruesome

remains of Naja—head severed—and the wreckage of the large Boomer assumed to be Araiya were scattered about. The other Boomers were destroyed so completely their original shapes couldn't be determined. Mason took out a cigarette and lit it.

Houri, who had been scouting the area in Mason's stead, returned to report. From her beautiful, Noh-mask-like face, her red-painted lips spoke in a lovely voice.

"Everything is as planned. Maggie Mae is following it. Honestly, though, the USSD created a real handful!"

"Well, it can't be helped. Even if we call it USSD, it's so rotten you could just call it GENOM itself!"

"So, what's next, Mason?"

"We have to wait for contact. For now, Houri, you collect the data from those guys. We might find something. I'll report to the Chairman."

Mason ordered Houri to retrieve the records concerning the GX-2 from the fallen subordinates. Houri approached the wreckage of their chests. Reaching for the chest area of what looked like Paja, she opened her five slender fingers. Several wire sensors with biological movements extended from her fingers and nails, piercing into the chest.



Houri's eyes rolled back, glowing with a deep cerulean blue light, while the sensors glowed a throbbing crimson. She remained calm.

After watching Houri for a moment, Mason stepped toward the car. By then, a crowd including factory workers had gathered to see the explosion, making a noisy commotion.

The factory manager approached Mason, who feigned indifference, and tried to speak while bowing politely, but Mason ignored him. With an extremely arrogant attitude, Mason signaled his driver to push the manager away. Once inside the car, Mason called Chairman Quincy on the visi-phone. It was busy. He waited.

In the GENOM Chairman's office, Quincy was receiving a report from Maggie Mae, who was tracking the GX-2.

"Wiped out? I thought so!"

"It seems the target is that satellite. The GX-2 is taking Route 8. Its destination is likely N.D.P."

"I see. Is that why N.D.P. has been acting strange lately?"

"It would be helpful if you could deploy Murdoch."

"Murdoch, huh? I suppose it's about time to dispose of that one as well, Maggie Mae."

"If he succeeds, all the better. If he fails—"

"You always come up with such terrifying ideas! I'll think about it. And Mason?"

"He's staying in touch as expected."

"A man who is too sharp is a problem... especially if he isn't satisfied with the status quo. It's dangerous—"

"Yes, I understand. Houri will handle it. Go!"

Maggie Mae vanished from the screen. As Quincy sat in thought, another line called. The monitor displayed the text "MAISON." The time was 3:20 PM.

"Did it show up?"

"Yes, sir. I missed it by a hair. However, as planned, Maggie Mae is tracking the GX-2—" Mason said from the screen.

"Good. I'd like to recover the GX-2 safely if possible, Mason! We spent a fortune on it!"

Quincy's words sounded as though he placed full trust in Mason.

"As much as possible! I will contact you again."

"Mm!"

After cutting the phone, Quincy fell into thought. At the N.D.P. Maggie Mae mentioned, there was a high-output data communication satellite nearing completion in a tie-up with GENOM. If that ultra-secret project were stolen by the GX-2, the disadvantage to GENOM's global information strategy would be immeasurable. Worse, if Mason—the man who knew everything about GENOM—were to collude with whoever was controlling the GX-2, it would be extremely dangerous. Depending on how it was used, world domination was possible.

Quincy was a cautious man. His foresight and caution had built the GENOM of today. After a moment, he called Murdoch. Murdoch, a sharp-looking man in uniform—a combat helicopter commander for the Army's 3rd Division—appeared on screen.

"What is it, Chairman?"

"Murdoch, I need you to deploy three of your helicopters immediately."

"By helicopters, do you mean the AHX-136?"

"Indeed!"

"Are we starting a war somewhere?" Murdoch smiled, his face dark from a sun-burn. He was a bellicose man.

"Don't be so happy. It's a troublesome job. Gather your best men."

"Don't worry. Even against our own army, I'll perform exactly as you wish. So, who are we hitting?"

"You've heard the rumors—it's that Boomer, Murdoch!"

Murdoch's eyes turned serious. He had heard the GX-2 was rumored to be the strongest of this century. Murdoch, who was naturally dismissive of Boomers and believed in manpower, found this a perfect opponent. Defeating it would prove the superiority of soldiers.

"Are you sure I can hit it with the AHX?"

"Of course."

"Where is it?"

"Tinsel. Heading south on Maglev Line 8. It might switch to Line 3. Mark it!"

"Understood. I'll be there within 30 minutes—over!"

"Mm, I'm counting on you!"

Murdoch gave a crisp salute on screen.

"Now, let's see how the pieces move!" Quincy wore a crafty expression.

Meanwhile, Mason was waiting for Houri. After a while, she returned to the car but didn't get in. Mason opened the power window suspiciously.

"How was it? Did you find anything?"

"Not much! But Mason... the GX-2 might be even better than the rumors."

"Hoh. It would be a waste to destroy it, then!"

"Let's go. I want to see this with my own eyes."

"Wait, I have something I want to 'clean up' first."

Houri winked. She walked briskly toward the private industrial road between Block B and Block A.

Mack was parked on the private road about 200 meters from Mason's Bentley. He had reclined his seat, trying to look comfortable and sleepy while monitoring Mason's movements.

Suddenly, a woman's large body blocked Mack's view through the side window. Her wrap-around skirt fluttered slightly, revealing a tantalizingly sexual thigh. She was swaying her hips provocatively. Mack sat up to see her face and rolled down the window. It was Mason's woman. Mack, hiding his surprise, tried to act calm.

"I-is something wrong?"

"I want... something from you. Your... L-I-F-E."

Houri smiled and leaned down to whisper, her breath almost touching him. Mack didn't realize it was a death sentence.

"Eh? What? My ears are a bit bad, heh heh—"

Houri's body scent suddenly changed, sweetly tickling Mack's nostrils. The scent made Mack's lower body react. A detective with calm judgment was rapidly losing his "detective soul" to a single woman's deception.

"Did... something happen?"

"Why do you want to know, D-A-R-L-I-N-G?"

"I—well—heheh—"

Houri's lips moved alluringly. Mack narrowed his eyes. He wanted her.

"H-how about it? Let's go for a drive! Normally I wouldn't dream of—"

With a boldness he didn't usually possess, Mack whispered an invitation. Houri moved her lips close to his ear as if to kiss him.

"What?"

"Ugh... b-b-boomer—!"

Mack struggled against Houri with one hand, but her grip was terrifying. Mack's thick neck made an eerie bone-crushing sound and went limp. Houri wore a

ghastly smile. She pulled out Mack's police badge, glanced at it, and tossed it into the car.

Special Task Detective Mack Gerard, Class A, AD Police. 37 years old. A detective's death always comes suddenly.

In the "Inner Zone," District 10, the lingerie shop "SILK DOLLY" in the shopping district was elegant and refined, as befitting a high-end boutique. Sylia, in a sophisticated suit, was attending to customers. Mackie was at the register. Several female customers were admiring the elegantly displayed bustiers, camisoles, and panties. Most were designer items like Betty Jackson or Gianfranco Ferré—imports reflecting Sylia's taste. Sylia and Mackie's customer service was seasoned.

Sylia approached Mackie, who was busy ringing up several young women.

"I'm sorry to bother you while you're busy—!"

"Did you find anything?"

"Actually, the sponsor called saying it's an emergency. They're so selfish—"

"Yes! For the velour pants and shorts, the total with tax is exactly 4,675 yen."

"Oh, okay. Use this card, please."

"Understood—"

"Thank you very much, madam—"

Sylia stepped in between them, looking every bit the high-end boutique owner. She whispered to Mackie.

"Mackie, I'll leave the rest to you."

"Did something come in?" Mackie asked in a low voice.

"It seems so. Bye!"

Sylia disappeared into the private room behind the register. She took the elevator to her penthouse.

When Sylia was seeing off one of the customers, a micro-phone disguised as an earring rang without anyone noticing. After bowing to the customer at the exit, she returned to her room and stood before the visi-phone. The face of a smirking Fargo appeared.

"It's not looking good—you know what I mean? Meet me at the usual cafeteria at five!"

Sylia tensed for a second but quickly softened her expression.

"You're quite pushy, Fargo! Is it that—?"

"Hey! This is big business, and the other party really wants to meet you in person!"

"Wait! I'll meet them and hear what they have to say. Then make it four!"

"Fine, I'll manage. See you later!"

After cutting the visi-phone, Sylia rested her chin on her hand thoughtfully and looked at the clock. It was 3:30 PM. Her secret meeting place with Fargo, the cafe terrace "Tinos," was about a ten-minute walk away. She went to the next room and opened her closet, pulling out a set of clothes with a sense of style unlike her usual self. She needed a disguise to meet the client.

Chapter 4: Activation

Nene and Yoko, along with over twenty male and female operators, were briskly processing a massive amount of information—patrol statuses, civilian reports, and inter-police data—within the operator room, the “central nervous system” of the AD Police. High-tech instruments, navigators, and a large central monitor displayed the entirety of Tinsel City.

Yoko reported to Chief Arthur via visi-phone. Arthur appeared on the screen, stroking his beard.

“What is it?”

“We’ve received another report from Pron-ton. It seems Mack’s car has been discovered near the site.”

“Hmm...”

Leon’s image burst onto the screen during the conversation.

“Mack’s car...? So, where is he?”

“His police ID was found inside the car, but his whereabouts are unknown—”

Arthur groaned, furrows deepening between his brows.

“Alright! Find Leon and Daley immediately and get them to the scene!”

“Understood!”

Yoko switched lines to call Leon and Daley in Unit 13. While waiting, Nene leaned over.

“Hey, hey—did something happen to Mack?”

“Who knows? Maybe he left his car and went off to play somewhere. He’s a reliable guy, so I’m sure it’s fine—”

“He’s the one who married Claudia from General Affairs, right?”

“That’s him!”

“Unit 13 here, go ahead!”

"Leon! There's an accident in the Pronton Industrial Zone. Also, Mack's car was left behind and he's missing. Head there immediately!"

Leon's playful face stiffened in shock.

"Pronton?! Did something happen to Mack?"

"The boys from the 55th Precinct conducting the site investigation called it in. They found Mack's car abandoned with his ID still inside—"

"Tch!"

"Anyway, go check it out. It's the Chief's orders."

"We're already almost there. Later!"

The screen cut out.

"Ugh! He's always so impossible to deal with!"

Nene, who had been listening to the exchange, suddenly took off her headset and stood up as if she'd just remembered something.

"Yoko—can you cover for me for a bit?"

"What's up?"

"Nature calls. I'll be right back—"

Nene hurried out of the operator room and ran to a public phone in the lobby to call Sylia at "SILKY DOLL."

"It's me. Can you put Sylia on?"

"Nene! She just went upstairs—wait, thank you very much! Sorry, we're a bit busy, I'll transfer you now!"

"Thanks!"

Sylia answered after a short wait.

"Good timing. Regarding the time we discussed this morning, can we move it to six? What's up, Nene?"

"That works for me. I took yesterday off and leaving early today would look bad. You saved me! But what about Priss and the others?"

"I've already contacted them. So, what is it you need?"

"Oh, right! Actually, a detective named Mack from here has gone missing in Pronton!"

"Pronton... that's where the GENOM-affiliated food factory is, right? I saw a news report about an explosion there earlier—"

"That's the one. I ran into Leon at noon—he's the head of Mack's squad—and from what I heard, it seemed like they were marking GENOM for some reason. And now Mack is missing. Don't you think it's suspicious? I wanted to let you know—"

"I see."

"So, is this Leon capable?"

"He's 50% hard-boiled. A bit of a womanizer, but he's the top ace of the AD Police."

"And they've headed to Pronton?"

"Yes. Keep an eye on their movements. I'll see you at six-thirty."

Nene hung up and returned to the operator room.

Meanwhile, at the Pronton Industrial Zone, Leon and Daley were pulled up next to Mack's car in the Road Chaser, talking to plainclothes detectives about the disappearance. Leon searched the interior of Mack's car thoroughly. Eventually, he found a single expensive-looking ruby earring hidden behind the brake pedal. He called Daley over.

"Mack might have been taken out."

"I don't want to believe it. He just got married. I hope he's safe."

Daley looked worried as he turned the earring over in his hand.

"This belongs to the culprit, probably!"

"Definitely. Not something Mack could afford to buy."

"He was in and out of the ELECTOR HOTEL."

Priss was singing in her T-shirt, having taken off her rider jacket. The partnership with her bandmates, the Replicants, felt good, and a sharp rock feeling filled the empty seats. During a break between takes, a man entered the shop from the

manager's office. It was Numata, the shop's grumpy owner. Ignoring her rehearsal, Numata shouted at Priss:

"Priss! Get over here—"

Priss didn't stop singing.

"I've had enough of you! Not today! You think just because you're a little popular you can skip out? How many times do I have to—"

"Stop joking around! It's a reboot!"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Priss and the stubborn Numata were shouting at each other.

"Look, Priss. I'm not running this place as a hobby. I can't keep up with you young people's 'youthful drama.' Did you find a new boyfriend or something?"

Priss was at a loss for words. Suddenly, a man in a leather jacket who had been leaning against the door stepped into the conversation.

"That's right. I'm the man! Right, Priss?"

"Marcos—!" Priss shouted.

"Who are you?" Numata asked.

"Like I said, I'm the one she's seeing—"

"I'm her man!" Marcos said with a shy grin that didn't match his hard style.

Priss quickly caught on and said to Numata, "See? We have something important to discuss. See you tomorrow!"

She grabbed her jacket and helmet, winked at the band, and promised to make it up to them. Priss and Marcos left the shop, leaving the Replicants and Numata stunned.

Running up the short stairs, Priss laughed loudly and grabbed Marcos's hand.

"Hahaha—did you see their faces? Thanks, Marcos, you really saved me. I never have a good excuse to get out of there!"

"You're busy, huh?"

"Just some errands. But where are the others?"

"I just felt like drifting through the city alone for a bit, and I ended up here."

Marcos seemed hesitant to admit he had come specifically to see her.

"So that means Mason's—"

"His woman! She's getting cocky," Leon muttered in the Road Chaser. "Alright, let everyone know. We're finding Mason and that woman!"

At "HOT LEGS," Priss was rehearsing a new song, "HEART BREAKER," with the band.

"Shut up! Like I told the chief, I'm not feeling well. Besides, I have a mountain of private problems!"

"Oh, listen to her! I look after you and you talk about 'private'?"

Marcos and Priss sat in a coffee shop. Priss understood that Marcos had always liked her, but she kept the distance of an old friend.

"Sorry about what I said back there. Was it a bother?"

"That? Haha, don't worry about it. It gave me an excuse to leave."

"Good... then, if you have time, want to hang out for a bit? It's been a while."

"I see. Thanks—"

Marcos gave a gentle, childlike smile. They rode their bikes for five minutes to a downtown coffee shop called "Atomic Cafe." It was a bit dingy compared to the Inner District shops, but it was a favorite of Priss's. 1970s Motown was playing, which calmed her mood.

When the coffee arrived, an awkward silence settled between them. Priss was starting to regret coming.

"It's been about four years—the three of us used to hang out like this all the time."

"Yeah."

"I have somewhere I need to be soon. If you're still in town, come by again—"

"Please, just a few minutes. There's something I seriously need to tell you."

Marcos's eyes were dark and melancholy, pleading for her to listen. Priss checked her watch: 4:05 PM. She actually had plenty of time before her meeting with Linna.

"Alright. I have business in District 10, so let's just chat for a bit."

"Stop it! That's in the past, I've forgotten it—Marcos, you really haven't changed."

"I have changed! A lot happened, I dated different women, but none of them worked out. That's why I'm traveling on my bike."

"Oh, right, Priss! I stopped by Yokohama before coming here. Bashamichi Street has completely changed. Not a single old friend left. Living without restraint isn't as easy as I thought. Heh, go ahead and laugh. I'm getting old in my own way!"

"Marcos—everyone is the same. Even in a crummy city like this, you can still find a place to stand. Why don't you settle down?"

"I'd like to if I could!"

A deep sense of fatigue enveloped Marcos. Because his way of life was too pure, he was forced to drop out of a harsh social system. Like Priss, he had a dark past, having lost his parents in the earthquake and grown up in an orphanage. His strength was his solitude, but he tasted as much sorrow as he had strength. Like many youths of this era, his rebellion against society turned into a "reckless run," a hollow cycle of frustration. It was an exhaustion of energy. And that fatigue, like filth settling in a swamp, would eventually solidify into madness and lead to crime. But Marcos was still okay. Priss felt relieved.

"Is that so? I'll help you! We're friends, aren't we?"

"Yeah... friends. Since back then!"

Marcos's words were weak. Priss understood. Looking back, a simple dynamic had made their relationship complex. Before Priss's former lover and Marcos fought over her, Marcos had been her boyfriend. There was a happy time when a love triangle existed. But when Priss chose the other man, Marcos vanished. Priss, Marcos, and the lover who was now gone were all young, sharp, and reckless dreamers back then. They had created memories by burning through their youth.

After Marcos left, Priss's boyfriend—who had become a biker gang leader—was assassinated after learning of a certain organization's conspiracy. At that time,

Priss was just an innocent girl ready to follow him into death. But she met Sylia, who persuaded her to become a singer and live on as a member of the Knight Sabers. Priss had built her current self by learning how precious encounters between people are.

"Hey, Priss?"

"Yeah?"

"If you're willing... could we go back to how we were?"

"Haha, something was stuck in my chest. No, don't mind me. I forgot if I ever clearly told you 'I like you,' so I'm just rambling—"

Honestly, Marcos's words made Priss happy. But she wasn't naive enough to simply say it back just because he said it. And her identity as a Knight Saber stood in the way. She resented her own way of life, steeped in solitude.

"Marcos—T-h-a-n-k-s—but I can't say anything right now. Sorry—"

"Priss!!"

"Anyway, I have to go. Marcos, this city is actually okay once you live here. Let me know if you're staying—see ya!"

Unknowingly, her words had become more feminine. Feeling Marcos as a man, she almost remembered the fluttering in her chest she had nearly forgotten. If she stayed any longer, she would show too much of that side. But she had to reject it. Now was not the time. Leaving Marcos behind, Priss jumped on her bike and headed toward Sylia.

The cafe terrace "Tinos" was on the second floor of a building about a ten-minute walk from "SILKY DOLL." While Priss was at the "Atomic Cafe" with Marcos, Sylia was at "Tinos" with Fargo and Watanabe, the Director of N.D.P. They were huddled on heavy sofas by the window, conferring secretly. Classical music played in the quiet shop, making the odd trio look out of place.

"So, that's the gist of it. It's a matter of life and death for the Director—or rather, for N.D.P.," Fargo said to Sylia in his typically long-winded tone.

Watanabe nodded and continued, "That's right. The launch date for our secret multi-channel, high-output data communication satellite is fast approaching, and we're in a real bind. That satellite uses a method called complex inverse transformation—"

"Wait! So, about a week ago, abnormalities started appearing in your computer system?" Sylia asked, like a female detective conducting an interrogation.

"Exactly. At first, we thought it was just a simple operation error by a staff member, but it turned out to be intentional external interference. And then came the blackmail Fargo mentioned—"

Watanabe looked at Sylia imploringly, brushing back the hair stuck to his forehead.

"They want you to hand over the N.D.P. lab!"

Sylia thought hard. *It's the same. Who is behind this?*

"I have no idea what's going on. I don't know how they got information about our project. Then this morning, they sent a final ultimatum saying they'd attack if we didn't hand it over—!"

"The time?"

"They specified seven-thirty tonight."

"What is their benefit in blowing up the lab?"

"Who knows? That's what I'd like you to investigate—"

Sylia fell into thought. Fargo, who had been listening silently, spoke up.

"In other words, it's an invisible threat! Like in those old sci-fi movies. Anyway, the Director has already moved the communication satellite elsewhere, so all that's left is—"

Fargo made a cutting gesture with his hand. "The terms are set! It might be difficult because we can't see the opponent—"

"I understand. I'll take the job. Excuse me for a moment." Sylia stood up to use the phone in the back.

"Great, the deal is closed! Director, you can rest easy now—" Watanabe smiled with relief at Fargo's words.

Sylia, meanwhile, had a cold gleam in her eyes, reminiscent of the ultimate femme fatale, Betty Davis. This was the other face of the Knight Sabers' leader.

At the fitness club "FIBIY" on the fifth floor of the Porsche Building on Park Street, Linna, in a leotard, was giving an aerobics lecture to a dozen students to the beat of upbeat pop music. "FIBIY" was in District 25, a relatively clean part

of downtown. Linna was a popular instructor. The large floor was divided by stylish reinforced glass.

Linna was working quite seriously when a young colleague, Shinji, signaled to her that she had a phone call. Linna gave him a quick nod.

"CROSS UP! CROSS KICK! TOGETHER!"

It was an intense workout. Linna grabbed a towel, wiped the sweat from her forehead, told the students to continue, and jogged toward the phone. Shinji handed her a bottle of sports drink.

"Hello, Linna speaking. Oh, Toru? How are you? Of course I want to go—"

"No way, it's not like that! Wait, you're so impatient. Tomorrow? Yeah, I can make it tomorrow—"

Linna took a sip from the bottle and wiped her neck with the towel.

"OK! I'll definitely call. Yeah, see ya, bye-bye!"

She hung up. Shinji approached her.

"Did you break up with that guy from the other day already?"

"That's none of your business!"

Linna snapped back, chugging the rest of the drink and handing the empty bottle to Shinji.

"So," Shinji said, taking the bottle, "why don't you hang out with me sometime? I found a really cool place—"

"I'd love to see this 'cool place.' Just leave me a note and I'll go by myself—"

"You're too much, Linna! I can't compete with that."

"I heard you're a fast mover. Maybe you should show some restraint? Anyway, back to work!"

Linna moved briskly back to her students. She was a very capable woman. Looking at her now, there was no trace of the girl with a dark past who lost her parents to a Boomer incident. Her natural brightness had saved her. Her exceptional athletic nerves and indomitable spirit had caught Sylia's eye, leading her to become a member of the Knight Sabers.



The GX-2 was flying at high speed over the CTM Maglev Line 8, its rear acceleration nozzles firing. Its cruising speed matched the maglev train. If it continued, it would hit Line 3 in about thirty minutes. The GX-2 was moving through the gaps in the scheduled maglev traffic.

Chasing at the same speed was Maggie Mae, the four-legged dog-type Boomer.

How does he know the maglev operating system so well?!

Speeding south on the busy Line 8, both Maggie Mae and the GX-2 moved as one.

"What was that?!" The moment Yoko spoke, Leon let out a cry of surprise.

"Alright, my current location is Point G-17E. I'm heading there immediately. What about the others—"

"—Unit 9 is patrolling near the site and is heading there now. The others are tied up with other matters and likely can't move—"

Dailey flinched, waving his hands with over-exaggerated gestures, and said, "Y-you're joking, right?! Leon, you do it! You're the boss, aren't you—"

Scratching the back of his neck with one hand, Leon said sullenly, "Aah, I'm getting irritated! I hate this kind of stuff. Damn it!"

As if symbolizing Leon's frustration, the Road Chaser's patrol lights flashed, and it sped off with sirens wailing. It was a magnificent display of driving by Leon, an International A-Class license holder. Not once did he come into contact with the linear motor cars.

While they were moving through the tunnels, Priss was also heading south on Line 8, above the Checker Street, operating her bike in a fixed riding pose. However, it was a different bike from the one she had when she parted with Mackie. In fact, to meet Sylia's request, Priss had stopped by the skilled tune-up shop of a man known as Dr. Raven, who maintained the Knight Sabers' equipment. She had collected her favorite Motoslave, which had just finished repairs.

The Motoslave was a motorcycle-transformable reinforced exoskeleton developed by their leader, Sylia, as the primary weapon of the Knight Sabers. Dr. Raven was the one who had exerted great effort to make its realization

possible. It was a strange machine—like a bike, yet not a bike. Priss was quite fond of the Motoslave, which possessed tremendous hidden capabilities.

Priss rode onward. Below her, on the linear motor car tracks, the GX-2 flew, pursued by Maggie Mae. The time was 4:35 PM. The location was underground point D-17, the site of the previous day's Tinsel City Bank incident involving the power loaders in District 13. Currently, the forensics investigation by the regular police and AD Police had concluded. Awaiting future repair work on the damaged areas, the D-17 zone was closed off across a wide area and was completely deserted.

The GX-2 reached this contact point. Its rear sensors caught Maggie Mae tailing it, and it hid to launch an intercept on the deserted platform of Line 8.

Without realizing she had been detected by the GX-2, Maggie Mae entered the platform.

"What is your objective?"

By touching the high-voltage lines strung throughout the linear motor car district, the GX-2 used its "Fusion Function" to trickily build a barrier, intending to capture Maggie Mae. However...

"I cannot tell you now. If you wish to know, do not interfere with me—"

Maggie Mae, a dog-type Boomer with abundant combat experience as a member of GENOM's illegal operational squad, avoided the GX-2's trap instantly with sharp intuition. The two Boomers faced off. It was a strange sight—a talking dog.

"Why do you follow? This has nothing to do with you. Go back!"

"Who do you think you're talking to?"

"You lot? Hmph, don't make me laugh! Does it feel that good to be a pawn for humans? You wretches, our era is coming. An era where we will rule this planet!" The GX-2 spoke in a tone as if trying to persuade Maggie Mae. "Think carefully."

What is this guy talking about? Maggie Mae thought. However, because the O.M.C.S. (Over-Mind Control System) was functioning, no further thoughts could circulate in her head.

"Hah! I've heard lines like that somewhere before. Who fed you that crap?"

The moment Maggie Mae spat those words, her canine frame began to shudder violently as if convulsing. Maggie Mae's toned, metallic body began to bulge and expand strangely from the inside with an eerie sound. The skeleton itself grew massive, eventually transforming into the shape of a ferocious predator. The transformed Maggie Mae was the image of a mechanized ancient saber-toothed tiger. She was easily five times her size in dog form.

She fired toward the GX-2. The GX-2 dodged with unbelievable agility. The fierce battle between the two shook the entire D-17 area of the Citibank basement like a small earthquake.

"What was that?"

On Checker Street near the closed CTM connection point close to Citibank, Priss on her Motoslave felt the sudden earthquake and came to a sudden stop.

Is it Leon and Daley in Road Chaser 13?

The moment a suspicious expression crossed Priss's face, the sounds of the battle between the GX-2 and Maggie Mae leaked up from deep underground through the connection. Priss, wondering what was happening, headed toward the closed basement level.

Leon spun the Road Chaser around and accelerated rapidly toward Tinsel City Bank. Various speculations dominated the minds of the two.

"Look, Leon! I thought yesterday's incident felt like there'd be some leftover change to collect—"

The two were currently searching for clues. A contact came in from the AD Police HQ operator. Yoko appeared on the visi-phone.

"This is HQ. Based on a report from a civilian in District 13, an abnormal situation has occurred again in the area believed to be the Tinsel City Bank basement! Head there immediately!"

"Yeah. But seriously, what the hell has started now? We're just being jerked around!"

"Even regarding the Thornton matter, since we have no clues other than catching Mason's woman, we might just have to crush anyone moving suspiciously."

"Damn that Mack! Where did he disappear to? Daley, if anything happens... take care of my wife!"

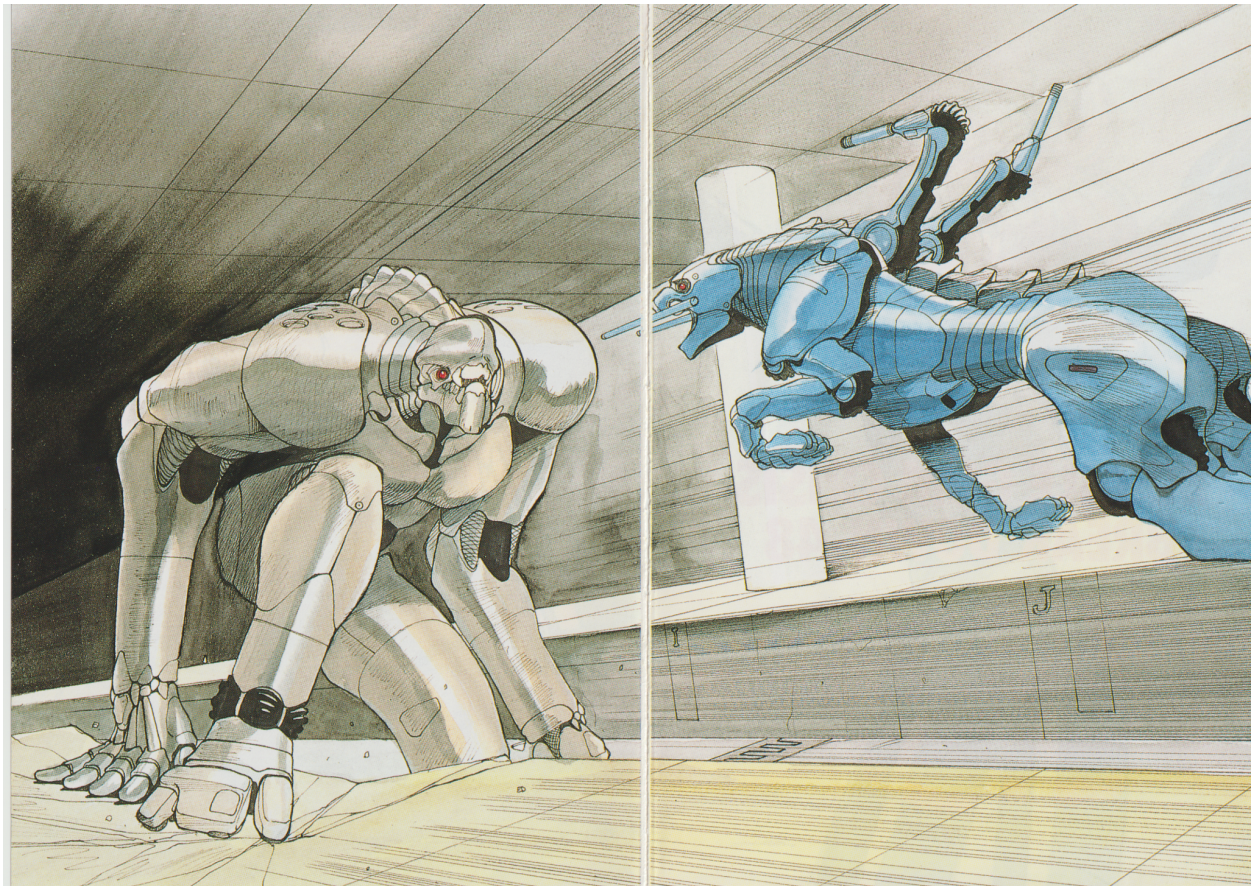
"D-don't joke like that! Leon, you do it! You're the boss—"

Leon spoke sullenly.

Inside the junction where CTM Line 8 and Line 3 merge, the GX-2 and Maggie Mae were still fighting violently. Although she was experienced in battle, Maggie Mae—who was ultimately a BU-55C type—was forced into a disadvantage before the GX-2, the latest and strongest new-model Boomer.

The GX-2 did not flinch at the scene unfolding before him. There was no change in his fearless expression. Maggie Mae, the Boomer Hunter who boasted experience in a hundred battles in the underworld as an illegal Boomer, shook herself violently from side to side and back and forth, trying to force an opening in the GX-2. But the GX-2 did not move.

Losing her patience, Maggie Mae leaped into the air, clicked open her back armor plates, and exposed a laser gun with a somewhat organic shape.



She fired at the GX-2.

Gradually becoming wounded and suffering deep damage in various parts, Maggie Mae pushed the potential of the organic motors within her body to the limit. Aiming for a mutual kill against the GX-2, who possessed unfathomable and mighty power, she prepared for a final attack.

"What's wrong, Maggie Mae? Have you run out of tricks?"

"—? How do you know my name?"

"The Mother told me—"

"Don't be stupid! The one who made you was GENOM, our ruler."

"I know nothing of that. Mother is everything."

"Tell me, who is that—?"

"It's no use, it's already too late!"

The GX-2 slowly cornered Maggie Mae against the station wall. At that moment, the GX-2 noticed Priss on her Motoslave racing into the area. Simultaneously, Priss discovered the two Boomers, Maggie Mae and the GX-2, and shouted as she leaped off the Motoslave. The Motoslave bounced while moving on its own, transformed into its robot form, and took an intercept stance.

"Motoroid, Mode!!! Intercept!"

Priss looked around the dim station. *Who are these guys? What the hell are they doing?*

In the split second he was distracted by the Motoroid, Maggie Mae, cornered by the GX-2, spit out a micro-data unit from within her body onto the tracks and made a final gamble to attempt a fusion with the GX-2. That is, by utilizing the fusion function and her own self-destruct device, she intended to take him with her.

Maggie Mae slammed into the GX-2. She latched onto the GX-2's right arm, which was slow to evade, and began the fusion. The GX-2 struggled. Maggie Mae activated the self-destruct device. The countdown began.

It was a tremendous energy of destruction; the surrounding walls crumbled away. At the epicenter, a large space had formed, filled with jagged concrete debris and the ends of steel reinforcements.

Priss peered through the darkness, cautiously seeking the bodies of Maggie Mae and the GX-2. She couldn't leave until she had a satisfying answer as to what happened to them.

It was then. From the darkness where the Motoroid was stirring, there was a nasty sound of something being crushed. The next moment, a small explosion occurred.

A flash of immense light streaked through the area, followed by a roar and a blast of wind with nowhere to go that blew through the station.

After a while, the smoke thinned. In the dark CTM passage, Priss, who had been blown back along with the Motoroid and was crouching with a light concussion, stood up unsteadily, holding her throbbing head. The gun was still gripped in her hand.

"What the hell, you bastards! Ow, that hurts..."

Priss, not understanding the feud between Maggie Mae and the GX-2, groaned. The first thing she saw was the Motoroid, reduced to a gruesome state. It had taken the full force of the explosion, yet it tried to stand up according to Priss's command. It was the sad nature of a machine that it wouldn't lose its will to fight until it was completely destroyed.

"Damn it! Old man Raven went through all the trouble to tune it up, and now it's like this!"

Anger welled up in Priss. Her body felt hot. Dull pain was felt here and there. She operated her multi-function wristwatch to contact Sylia, but it wouldn't work—perhaps it was broken. Tsking, Priss spat on the ground. *I'll kill them!*

Licking the red blood from her cut lip, she vowed revenge. Priss moved toward the epicenter where the GX-2 and Maggie Mae were.

Before Priss, who was trying to rush back, stood the GX-2—the murder cyber-droid boasting a resilient body, now down to one arm. Whipping her aching body, she fired three consecutive shots of .357 Magnum KTW (armor-piercing rounds with brass heads and Teflon coating) at the GX-2 while leaping to the side. Within the muzzle flash, the GX-2 let out an strangely high-pitched scream while retreating for a few seconds, then collapsed.

Priss felt relieved. But that was short-lived. The GX-2 spat out all the KTW rounds fired into its mouth and stood up again. Priss's eyes widened, her expression turning to one of shock. While Priss was faltering, the GX-2

approached with a speed unbefitting its massive frame, swatted the Scramble Shot from her hand, and closed in as if he had something to say. To Priss, who stood in a predicament while nursing her numbing hand, the GX-2 posed a question.

"You are a comrade of the Knight Sabers, aren't you?"

Priss was stunned. Her breathing became heavy. "How do you know about the Knight Sabers?"

"It seems I've hit the mark. I want to know why your leader, Sylia, formed the Knight Sabers."

"I don't know—*huff, huff*—if you want to know that badly, find out after you've killed me!"

"I see. It seems it was useless after all. Then, shall I have you die?!"

The GX-2 grabbed Priss by the collar with his remaining left arm and lifted her lightly into the air.

"Damn it—if you're gonna do it, get it over with!"

Priss let out a pained voice. Immediately after, another bike descended into the station, echoing its exhaust note just as Priss had done earlier. It was Marcos.

The GX-2 released Priss and changed his stance to face the bike. However, Marcos's bike was unexpectedly fast. While dazzled by the high speed and the glare of the headlights, the GX-2 was knocked against the tunnel wall by the bike's momentum. Marcos barely managed to jump off the bike just before impact, but he injured one leg. It seemed he had a fracture. Greasy sweat broke out on Marcos's forehead.

"Marcos!"

Because of the dim light in the station, Priss only recognized him when she ran close, then screamed.

"Priss, my leg's messed up. I can't move—don't worry about me, get out of here!"

Marcos desperately tried to stand up. When Priss saw the GX-2 slowly rising from a depression in the tunnel, she frantically searched the surrounding darkness and found her Scramble Shot again.

"Marcos—"

Priss called Marcos's name as if to rouse herself. Marcos looked like he was about to lose consciousness. He looked at Priss with narrowed eyes and smirked. Immediately after, Marcos haphazardly snatched Priss's Scramble Shot, wrung out his last bit of strength to stand, turned toward the GX-2, and said while taking aim:

"Priss, run while I hold him off!"

Marcos's mouth twisted in pain. Priss didn't know why Marcos was here. But he was here; that was reality. And it was also a fact that Marcos had stood up to help Priss when she was on the brink of death. If she was to die, she wanted to die together. But she had to live.

Faced with the GX-2, Marcos spoke in a commanding tone. Priss was speechless.

"Go on, Priss!!"

It was the voice of a man she couldn't disobey even if she wanted to.

Marcos fired. Empty shells danced at Priss's feet. Marcos fired again. Every time he fired, he moved up the stairs. The GX-2, making a mechanical sound and eyes glowing crimson, approached slowly.

"You idiot! Hurry up—" Marcos shouted, pushing away Priss as she tried to lend him her shoulder.

"I can't leave you! Come on, give me your hand!"

"Don't screw around, you wanna die?"

As long as there was a chance to escape, she would do her best to struggle. Lending her shoulder to Marcos, Priss walked desperately toward the stairs leading to the surface. Behind them, the GX-2 followed slowly as if to torment them. Though she knew it was futile, Priss fired a few Scramble Shots to buy time. The GX-2 flinched slightly but was undeterred.

"Don't come any closer! You piece of crap!"

"Priss, thanks. That's enough, please just run—!"

Suddenly, halfway up, Priss made up her mind. As she ran back down the stairs, she encountered a terrifying sight. The GX-2 had grabbed Marcos and slammed him against the wall like he was throwing away a rag. A shudder ran through Priss's entire body.

"Marcos!!!"

Priss screamed at the top of her lungs. The GX-2 looked at her. He approached. Just as his eyes began to shine with murderous intent, a police siren echoed through the connection.

The GX-2 moved away from Priss, fired his back acceleration nozzles, and disappeared as if jumping into the Line 3 tunnel. It was the direction of South-Southwest. At the same time, Priss ran to the fallen Marcos and held him.

"Marcos, Marcos!"

"Are you okay? Marcos—"

"Everywhere hurts too much—*ugh!* It's all gone numb—"

Marcos was coughing up crimson blood.

"Why are you here?"

"Heh—sorry, after that—*ugh*—I ended up following you!—well—"

"What, what are you trying to say?"

"Well, I wanted to say a word of apology to Priss—Duke, he went in my place—When I was being a delinquent and getting into dangerous work, the organization got a hold of me—Duke... in the afterlife, his reputation might be a little—*gaaaah*—upheld—"

"—So that was it—"

"Don't laugh... even so, a friend is a friend—Priss—*huff, huff*—I'm not a total waste, am I? If only I'd met you before Duke—"

Marcos, who had breathed his last, had a satisfied look on his dead face.

Priss shook his body, which had stopped moving. "Marcos—you looked great. The best!!"

Priss prayed for Marcos's soul for a while. The footsteps of several people coming down the stairs echoed through the station. Priss bid farewell to Marcos, reloaded her now-empty Scramble Shot, and ran toward the stairs leading to a different connection point.

It was the duo of McGuffey and Chapman from Patrol Car Unit 9. Reaching the CTM station, which was destroyed beyond recognition, they were speechless. Parts of Maggie Mae and the Motoroid, deformed and scorched by high heat

during the explosion, were scattered across a wide area. And then they discovered the body of the biker-looking Marcos. It was a gruesome sight, difficult to comprehend.

Damn it! I'll definitely get revenge with these hands—

As the two began to investigate the dim station, Priss emerged from the connection point she had escaped through. She saw a young man in a phone booth who had stopped his bike. The keys were still in the sports bike.

Priss ran to it and borrowed it without permission. The young man in the phone booth noticed, but Priss didn't care; she started the engine and took off toward the South-Southwest, where the GX-2 had fled along Line 3. As she sped away at high speed with the speedometer climbing, the figure of the young man chasing her in a rage grew small in the rearview mirror until he collapsed on the road out of strength.

"Sorry, I'll pay you back if I don't break it," Priss muttered in her heart.

Near the Elector Hotel that Mason had been using, Lowy's Bentley was parked. In the back seat, Mason was smoldering a cigarette.

"It seems Maggie Mae has been killed as well," Lowy said to Mason, sensing the special ultrasonic waves emitted from the data unit Maggie Mae had left in the station.

"It seems the AD Police have rushed there from another entrance. Can you recover it successfully?"

"That's a simple matter—" Lowy smirked.

Mason nodded slightly and signaled with his eyes to go.

Lowy got out of the car. She climbed over the barricades closing the connection point and infiltrated the interior. Inside the station, McGuffey and Chapman continued their search in the dim light, relying on handheld lamps. McGuffey, walking on the Line 8 tracks, noticed the data unit Maggie Mae had left behind, picked it up, and informed Chapman, who was investigating Marcos's body. The two talked while tilting their heads at the strangely shaped data unit.

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"What could this be?" McGuffey said. "Better take it back to the precinct."

"Who knows. Even that guy doesn't look like he's from this city. What the hell happened here? I haven't a clue!" Chapman said, pointing to Marcos's body. He was holding Marcos's driver's license in his hand.

"This is a real nasty business! Even after yesterday, what the hell is going on—" McGuffey spat.

"This city's going crazy! Well, at least it gives us a living—"

"I guess—"

During their conversation, Lowy suddenly appeared beside them. Startled, the two leveled their Magnum Hand Cannons. Lowy, looking out of place in the destroyed station, opened her lips with a seductive smile and said to them in a whisper, "My, what a greeting. Please put those crude things away!"

McGuffey and Chapman looked on with blank expressions.

"W-who are you? What are you doing in a place like this?" McGuffey asked in a sharp tone, his face full of confusion.

"Ho ho ho—that doesn't matter, does it? Now, that is something I was looking for. Give it back to me, won't you, boys!!"

"D-don't mess with me, you bitch!"

Chapman disengaged the safety on his hand cannon. At that moment, Lowy acted with terrifying speed. McGuffey and Chapman couldn't even fire; they were brutally murdered in an instant and fell on the spot.

Lowy recovered the data unit Maggie Mae had left from McGuffey's hand. After confirming the shape of the data unit, she abruptly unbuttoned her jacket and pulled up her white knit top. She wasn't wearing a bra. Her slender proportions and perfectly shaped, balanced breasts were exposed. Then, a bizarre scene began. The space between her breasts suddenly split open vertically, taking the shape of female genitalia and beginning to stir biologically. Lowy inserted her hand there, pulled out her own data unit, and embedded Maggie Mae's in its place. By embedding it, Lowy understood—the details of the battle between the GX-2 and Maggie Mae. And simultaneously, she learned of the existence of the Motoslave and Priss.

Is this woman one of the Knight Sabers?!

Lowy flashed a cold smile. She adjusted her clothes again and left the scene to return to Mason from the station. Checking the surroundings, she emerged from the connection point and quickly returned to the Bentley. As she took her seat, the car started.

"Did you find out?" Mason asked.

"It seems the GX-2 is being controlled by some megalomaniac who plots to rule this Earth. The GX-2 calls that person 'Mother'—"

"Mother?"

"Yes. It seems he believes their era is coming soon."

Their era? Does he mean the era of Boomers?

Mason thought of GENOM's top secret, the O.M.C.S. (Over-Mind Control System).

Is the liberation of Boomers the ultimate goal? Or is it something else? In any case, there's someone else who thinks like I do!

Mason took an interest in "Mother." If he could join forces, he might be able to seize the world in one stroke.

"Good. When we get back to the office, have a still of that person printed out—!"

Mason might be able to mock them. Judging by Mother's series of maneuvers, it seemed she knew this computerized world well and enjoyed mocking the incompetence of GENOM and the police. His own ambitions might be realized early. Mason had no intention of remaining GENOM's lapdog forever. Mason was that kind of man.

"What is it, Mason?"

"Hm? No, it's nothing. And then?"

Mason smoothed things over with the suspicious-looking Lowy. Lowy continued.

"So, looking at the state of the station, the GX-2 probably disappeared along CTM Line 3—"

"I see. Anything else?"

"It seems a young woman in a rider suit happened to be at the scene for some reason. And a high-precision robot—though now it's been turned into smashed scrap—"

"A robot? What was its shape?"

"A humanoid that changed from a motorcycle."

"The Knight Sabers!"

Mason groaned in a harsh tone, wrinkling his brow. Lowy gave a cold smile, underestimating them. "They're just human girls. I thought—"

"Don't underestimate them! Lowy, if you take them lightly, it'll turn into a real headache—"

Mason's tone grew even harsher.

"Enough!"

Mason, feeling bothered by the conversation with Lowy, cut her off. Then he gave an order to the man driving the Bentley silently.

"Head for N.D.P.!"

"Yes, sir!"

The driver turned the Bentley right from Checker Street toward N.D.P. While it wasn't clear what Mason was thinking, Lowy asked.

"What is it all of a sudden? What's at N.D.P.?"

"Just leave it to me. I haven't been serving GENOM for nothing."

"Oh, really! I guess you're just that much smarter for having lived so long, Mason!! Well, I'll leave it to you."

While Mason and the others were heading to N.D.P. around 5:25 PM, Leon and Daley arrived late at the crime scene where McGuffey and Chapman lay. About a dozen AD Police officers had entered the station and were searching while guarding the area. While a disposal team was attempting to carry out the bodies of their brutally killed colleagues, McGuffey and Chapman, and also Marcos, Leon and Daley were discussing the outcome of the matter.

Leon pointed at the remains of the Motoroid.

"I don't get it at all, but those Knight Sabers have their hands in this too."

"Heh, so that's it—but how do you know?"

"I told you, I'm a fan of the Knight Sabers."

Daley, not understanding, looked blankly.

"This is a total mess, but Leon! Isn't it dangerous if we don't go all out?"

"Probably! But I can't let this go any longer."

Leon set his lips firmly and continued.

"I don't know what kind of guy it is, but since he hasn't appeared in the city, he must still be wandering the CTM lines. Probably Thornton and this place were both the work of the same guy! The guy from yesterday was an accomplice too. —And, it's that!"

"Hm?"

"The culprit is definitely going to show up at Line 3. Alright, I'm going! I'll be somewhere on Line 3."

"If it's a wild goose chase, what are you gonna do?"

"I'll deal with it then! It's no use just sitting around! —Anyway, Daley, I'll leave the report to HQ to you!"

Leon left Daley and ran up the stairs toward Road Chaser 13, parked on the street near the station connection.

In the locker room for instructors at the fitness club "FIBIY," Linna was chatting with her colleagues.

"Linna! You said you were closing up early today, do you have plans?"

Vanessa, who looks innocent but is quite savvy, asked.

"Oh, that? My plans got a little messed up—" Linna replied while scrubbing her body with a body brush in the clean shower room adjacent to the locker room.

Then, Vanessa's voice entered their conversation from the other side.

"Linna, aren't you playing around too much?"

"It's not that! That was everyone getting calls from their boyfriends, right?"

"Exactly, Linna's handling it well!" Elaine followed up jokingly.

"No way! Even during work, the phone is ringing off the hook! Linna's famous for her frequent visits!"

Linna counterattacked.

"So what! I go often but it's hard to find a good man."

When Elaine said that, Vanessa argued back.

"No way, I saw you the other day!"

"What! What was it? Tell me Vanessa, what kind of guy?"

Elaine got flustered when the topic turned to her.

"Ah, how dirty! Vanessa, you're doing something risky too, so I'll spill it to Linna, just wait!"

Linna and the others were quite noisy. Eventually, Linna came out of the shower room, put on her clothes in the locker room, finished her face with simple makeup, said goodbye to her colleagues, and left the room.

She took the elevator from the front of "FIBIY." A glance at her wristwatch showed the hands pointing to 5:30 PM. The elevator quickly reached the first floor from the fifth. Linna had a promise to meet Priss at that time in the first-floor lobby. However, looking around, there was no sign of Priss coming at all. After waiting irritably for about 15 minutes, she finally took a credit card from her bag, inserted it into the public phone, and called Sylia.

"Ah, Sylia? It's Linna. Priss, she said 5:30 in the lobby herself, but she's nowhere to be found—Say, has there been any contact over there—?"

"—No. Nene is already here, but it's a sudden job, and we're in a real rush preparing now, so hurry over!"

"Is it that urgent? Where to?"

"Details later, we're leaving here at 6:00 sharp!"

"Well, I'll wait for Priss a little longer; maybe I can catch her here? By then, there might be at least some contact."

"This is a pain, with Priss too. Did you try the call waiting?"

"I already did! No response," Linna said with irritation.

"It's a pain with Priss... if she shows up, let me know!"

"Okay, I think I can be there around 6:30!"

"Please, later! We're waiting!"

Linna hung up the phone and wandered around the lobby looking for Priss. Eventually, she sat on a sofa and began to worry about Priss. Linna had no way of knowing what had happened to Priss.

In the Knight Sabers' secret hideout in the basement of the "SILKY DOLL" building, Sylia, Nene, and Mackie were almost finished preparing for tonight's mission. There was still no word from Linna that Priss had appeared. Having completed the check of weapons and parts, Mackie entered the computer room, put on a receiver, and switched on the deck for intercepting police radio. Sylia and Nene relaxed for a moment while making hot coffee in another room. Although she was irritated inside, Sylia, who never lost her elegant demeanor, took a puff of a cigarette and walked over to Mackie. Nene was also restless, worried about Priss's whereabouts. Priss's role was significant. Her absence was a problem that affected the survival of the Knight Sabers, who made danger their trade.

"How is it, Mackie? What about the CTM after that?"

"I don't know why, but it seems they're changing the usual contact codes randomly—"

"So, is decoding possible?"

"Yeah. But tracking it is a huge task! And it's a relatively sophisticated code for them—"

"So, did you find out anything?"

"Two AD Police officers died in the line of duty, and the body of an unidentified young man was found at the scene, so they're desperate to figure that out—He apparently had a driver's license, but it seems it was a black-market item—"

"Anything else?"

"Ah, wait a second—" Mackie put the receiver back on. Leon's voice could be heard.

"—To Station E-17! This is ADP-13 of District 13! Report the verification results of BU-55C type and UKM; furthermore, ADP-13 is entering formation K-19 toward WSW. Regarding UR—"

Mackie looked at the decrypted characters appearing one after another on the monitor screen beside the interception deck. There, characters for a "special combat Boomer" and "unidentified robot"—things rarely seen—appeared.

"It says a special type of Boomer and a robot, Sis!"

"It couldn't be the Motoroid—" Sylia spoke with a voice full of anxiety and dread.

"Priss wouldn't be beaten, Sis!" Mackie said, as if to deny Sylia's words.

"No, it's entirely possible. Priss was supposed to stop by Dr. Raven's and collect the Motoslave, and if she happened to pass through Checker Street—"

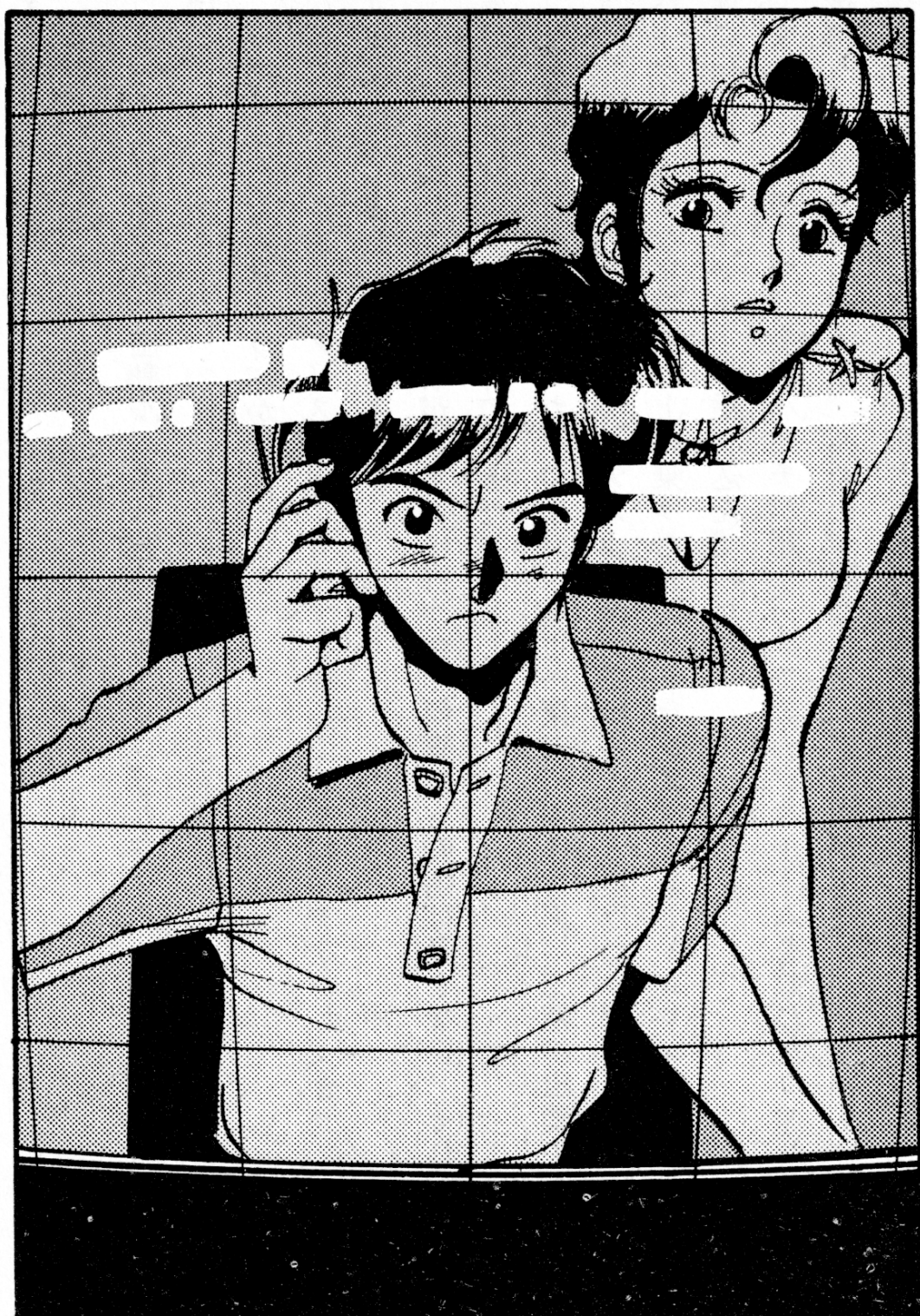
Nene, who had appeared behind them at some point, joined in.

"And it's past the time she was supposed to make periodic contact—I'm worried."

"There's no way to investigate further, so what do we do, Sis?"

Mackie asked with a worried voice.

"Well, it's not like we mentioned anything about Priss, so it can't be helped. Come on, Mackie, move out! After we pick up Linna, we'll go through Chinatown and take that road—"



"Yeah..."

Mackie stood up from his seat and headed toward the dispatch room. Sylia and Nene followed. Nene gave voice to her anxiety.

"I wonder if Priss is going to be okay...?"

"She'll be fine. Priss isn't the kind of girl to mess up. I'm sure she'll show up full of energy sooner or later."

Sylia spoke to Nene with a smile. She showed no agitation, no matter the circumstances. That was her creed as the leader of the Knight Sabers.

The dispatch room was on the upper floor. In other words, the first basement was the parking garage, the second floor was the dispatch room, and the third floor served as the maintenance and information integration room. Mackie was already inside the driver's seat of the Command Carry—a large transporter positioned atop a massive, freight-elevator-like lift.

Under Mackie's operation, the rear hatch opened, and Sylia and Nene entered the back of the Command Carry, which doubled as a maintenance room. Once the hatch closed, the lift activated, and the Command Carry rose toward the parking level. The floor slid wide to the left and right as the Command Carry emerged into the garage, revealing its massive form. It was camouflaged to resemble a standard large truck of this era. The moment the lift met the garage floor, the Command Carry launched from the underground parking toward the outside. Its speed was remarkable for such a giant vehicle.

Meanwhile, tired of waiting for the unreachable Priss, Linna stood irritably on the sidewalk of Park Street in front of the Porsche Building. Spotting the large transporter in the distance, she waved. The Command Carry pulled up and stopped in front of her. Mackie poked his head out from the driver's seat.

"Where's Priss?"

Linna made a gesture indicating it was no use.

"Can't be helped, just get in...!"

"But man, what on earth happened to Priss?"

Muttering to herself, Linna entered the interior through the Command Carry's rear hatch.

As soon as Linna boarded, the Command Carry immediately set off. They were heading out to do a job at the N.D.P. In the back, Linna and Nene had worried faces, still thinking about the missing Priss. Sylia appeared much the same as usual.

The time was 6:40 PM. They had to be at the N.D.P. by 7:30. At Sylia's signal, the three of them began stripping off their street clothes and underwear, donning their battle lingerie and then their Hard Suits in succession. Inside, various parts specifically for the Knight Sabers were neatly prepared on the floors, walls, and ceiling.

Each member chose the specific tools suited for their own Hard Suit and equipped them with practiced skill. In the intervals between, Sylia explained the operational procedures for the N.D.P. job. Linna and Nene still didn't seem quite into it yet.

The fact that one Hard Suit sat left behind was the problem.

Priss was missing.

"Listen, you two. I'm worried about Priss too, but a job is a job! No matter what happens, we have to keep things professional. You understand?"

Sylia spoke in a stern tone as their leader.

"But still... we've always done so well as a group of four. I wonder if we'll be okay? This job with only three people... it seems like there are so many things we don't know about it."

The timid Nene muttered fearfully.

"It's fine, it can't be helped! These things happen sometimes. Let's do our best, Nene. Besides, it's not like it's been decided that something happened to Priss."

Linna encouraged Nene.

"Yeah, okay..."

"Nene, don't get discouraged. Based on the reward amount alone, this job is extraordinary—so it might be tough, but—"

At Sylia's words, Nene's eyes sparkled with a mercenary glint.

"Wait, I haven't heard about this! How much is it exactly...?"

"The down payment is half, 30 million. The rest is after the mission succeeds. Even this late in the game, given the amount, it looks like it's going to be a major job."

"Whoa, that's amazing! Nene is definitely going to work hard...!"

Nene's expression became full of life.

"I'm going to make sure I get mine, too!"

Linna followed up with spirited words.

"You two are so carefree, it's a good thing. That greed might be the source of your power. Well, it's fine to be in a good mood, but just make sure your preparations are solid."

Sylia said with a smile.

By the time they finished equipping their Hard Suits, Linna and Nene had regained their passion for the work, and were laughing and chatting about aimless things. As Sylia watched the two of them, she became lost in reminiscence. In Sylia's mind, past memories flickered one after another. Sylia slowly closed her eyes.

It was inside an elegant house on the outskirts of Tinsel City. Sylia, who had just turned twelve, and five-year-old Mackie stood lonely in the living room. Night had fallen, and the time had passed 2:00 AM. Sylia, who had been soothing the cranky Mackie, made a call on the visi-phone. She wanted to contact her father, Dr. Stingray, who was practically living at the laboratory. Eventually, the call connected, and Sonoda, an assistant researcher, appeared on the monitor screen.

"Hello, Wiz Laboratory."

"Good evening."

"Ah, good evening. What's the matter? Please wait a moment..."

Sonoda turned around and called out to Dr. Stingray.

"Director! It's from your daughter."

Dr. Stingray interrupted his work and stepped into the frame to replace Sonoda.

"What's wrong, Sylia? Aren't you resting yet? It's already late... and even Mackie is up."

Dr. Stingray noticed Mackie's lonely face behind Sylia and spoke in a low, gentle, persuasive voice. Sylia nodded slowly.

"I'm sorry... Mackie is lonely and he won't go to sleep. Dad, it's been a week already. When will your work be finished?"

"Sylia, I told you before that Dad is doing very important research right now."

"Yes..."

Sylia answered weakly.

"Just a little more patience. Once it's over, let's all go on a trip somewhere. I'm sure it will be a fun one."

Dr. Stingray said with a smile. Behind him, a portion of the R&D room was visible. Under the complex computer operations of the busy laboratory staff, a prototype evaluation of an early-model Boomer installed in the center was undergoing performance checks.

The Boomer bugged out its exposed artificial eyes and shook its sternocleidomastoid muscles, its head twitching upward. One of the researchers, Tony, called out to Dr. Stingray while he was talking to Sylia.

"Sorry to interrupt, Director! We are switching the second and third battery units into GSI-05—"

Dr. Stingray turned toward the voice.

"Understood."

Then, he turned back to Sylia.

"Sylia, just a little more patience. I'll come home as soon as I can find the time, so please take care of Mackie."

Sylia made a pouting expression. During their conversation, in the R&D room, braking tests were being conducted on the Boomer's limbs. The Boomer's arms and legs, not yet attached to the main body, repeated inhuman movements. At the sound of Tony calling out again, Dr. Stingray interrupted the conversation to respond.

"Check the output in units of 1/10th of a second! Raise the power input level to 8.03! At this stage, it's nothing but an imitation made of synthetic resin, but this will open up the possibilities."

Dr. Stingray looked back toward Sylia with an apologetic face.

"I'm sorry, Sylia. It's as you see. Now, be a good girl. I'll contact you once things settle down. Go to sleep quickly."

She took Mackie to the bedroom—

Up to here was the first scene of memory that surfaced. Like switching through a multi-vision display instantly, fragmentary scenes flowed by, becoming a single streak of light circling inside Sylia's head. That light soon showed a rapid condensation, time-warping into the next scene.

With sirens blaring loudly, several fire trucks raced down the midnight freeway at high speed. They were heading toward Wiz Laboratory, which was engulfed in a fierce fire. A massive explosion occurred at the lab ahead. The fire trucks screeched to a halt at the gate, followed by several patrol cars. Sylia stepped out of one of the police cars. Anxious for Dr. Stingray, she stood there speechless and stunned. Bathed in the reflection of the flames, she desperately endured her anxiety and grief, sensing the tragic news of her father's impending death.

One day, several weeks after the Wiz Laboratory fire, Sylia was in deep mourning over the sudden tragedy. She was slumped over her desk by a window where the dazzling afternoon sunlight was streaming in. Little Mackie approached her, holding a postal parcel in his hand.

"Big sister, this arrived."

Sylia took the parcel in silence. When she opened it, it contained a data unit labeled for educational use.

"A data unit? Who on earth...?"

Sylia went into the study her father had used during his life and sat before the microcomputer. Then, with a level of skill unthinkable for a twelve-year-old, she operated the keyboard and integrated the data unit into the computer. She placed a headphone-style synchronizer on her head and began to comprehend the incredibly complex characters, symbols, and numbers displayed on the monitor screen.

The contents of the data unit were related to advanced, state-of-the-art aerospace engineering. Sylia thought it had likely been intended for Dr.

Stingray. However, while accessing it, the screen suddenly changed, and the words "FOR SYLIA ONLY" appeared.

"Only for Sylia?"

With a puzzled expression, Sylia tapped the keys with rapid finger movements. Her father's message had been hidden within the data unit. As she typed, through the synchronizer and along with the geometric movements of light on the monitor, a vast amount of messages from Dr. Stingray flowed into Sylia's mind. Sylia's young body went rigid, as if paralyzed. She forgot even to breathe as she was toyed with by the message unfolding at high speed—her mind and body completely overtaken.

- Sylia lying in a small bed, suffering from illness.
- When she was four years old.
- Stingray performing surgery, desperately trying to save Sylia.
- A strange young boy sleeping beside Sylia.
- Both of them were on the operating table.
- Eventually, Sylia opens her eyes.
- Stingray with an expression of joy.
- A beautiful mother, Sylia, and baby Mackie.
- Stingray with a blissful expression in a happy home.
- Quarrels between the mother and father, followed by separation—Stingray spending days in disappointment.
- A single man calling out to Stingray, who was despondent and drowning in alcohol from self-loathing.
- Stingray gaining the position of Director of Wiz Laboratory through the man's influence.
- Days devoted to the research and development of mechanical lifeforms.
- Completion of the prototype GSI-05.
- The "New Type" of mechanical lifeform that would evolve and develop.
- Explanation of the O.M.C.S (Overmind Control System)

—Explanation of the biological brainwashing bit elements based on a unique theory

—Dr. Stingray's laboratory, where he was immersed in research and development.

—A man named Mason standing at the entrance after opening the door

—Wearing black gloves and leveling a gun.

—A shocked Stingray.

—Mason firing mercilessly.

—Mason stealing the data disk containing the O.M.C.S. theory and setting fire to the lab as he leaves.

—Stingray, mortally wounded.

—Desperately operating the computer on his desk.

—Bidding farewell to Sylia and Mackie.

—Explaining the GENOM conspiracy.

"...Probably, my father, sensing his own death, used the city's electronic transmission delivery system to send that data unit to me. He must have provided me with this wisdom to protect Mackie and me from the hateful Mason and the GENOM organization that pulls his strings—!"

Sylia was released from the dizzying rush of memories. Now, she felt a surge of pride in her life as a Knight Saber, inheriting her father's will to stand against the Boomers—who threatened the very survival of humanity—and GENOM, the entity that gave them birth. This was all Sylia could do now. GENOM had grown far too massive, and the Boomers they produced were scattering calamity across the world. At times, a sense of helpless futility would rear its head, leaving Sylia in deep confusion.

"Is something wrong, Sylia?"

Coming out of her trance with a dazed expression, Sylia was addressed by a worried Nene.

"Are you feeling unwell?" Linna added.

"No, it's nothing—don't worry about it, I was just remembering some things from the past." When Sylia regained her usual bright tone, Linna and Nene were relieved.

While the Command Carry was racing toward the N.D.P., Priss was speeding down Courland Street—which runs parallel to the CTM Line 3—on a stolen sports bike. She was riding solely toward the west-southwest, where the GX-2 was expected to appear, her heart burning with thoughts of revenge.

Much like Priss, the Bentley carrying Mason and Lowy was heading from the incident site in District 13 toward the N.D.P., racing down the freeway and approaching the junction for Courland Street.

"Get off at District 25. Once we're out, head down Courland Street," Mason ordered the driver. Lowy, sitting beside him, gazed out the window at the passing scenery with an expression that suggested she had absolutely no interest in what was about to happen.

Chapter 5: Jeremiah

The GX-2 fired its acceleration nozzles, gliding at high speed toward the west-southwest along the CTM Line 3 pathway. Eventually, a small point of light appeared ahead, indicating where Line 3 emerged above ground. As the light grew larger and filled its field of vision, the GX-2, which had been maintaining an ultra-low altitude flight, leapt out into the open air. Before its eyes spread the outskirts of Tinsel City as twilight approached.

About five kilometers from the GX-2's position, the imposing building of the N.D.P. could be seen dominating its vast grounds. At that moment, three AHX-36s—the Army's state-of-the-art armored combat helicopters—appeared overhead, the roar of their rotors loud. Upon visual confirmation, the GX-2's eyes flipped and began to glow deep navy blue. Several sensors emerged from its torso, writhing as they reacted subtly to the movements of the AHX-36s.

Aboard the lead tandem-seat AHX-36 were Murdock and his subordinate pilot, Coldwell. They had intercepted the GX-2 as it burst from the CTM Line 3 tunnel and were moving into an attack formation. Similarly, the second craft, "Wildcat," and the third, "Snake," waited in the nearby airspace for Murdock's orders.

"Boomer speed is 1,183 km/h. AGM standby, OK." Coldwell spoke in a gleeful voice, eyeing his prey. Murdock nodded and called his subordinates through the head-com.

"Wildcat, Snake, what's your status?" "Yes sir!" "We've been OK for a while now, Commander." Energetic responses came back from Wildcat and Snake.

"Alright—let's go, boys! Do it!"

Six air-to-ground laser-guided missiles were fired, two from each craft. They streaked toward the GX-2 as if sucked in by it. Having landed on the ground, the GX-2 countered the accurately approaching missiles by aiming laser guns that had deployed from its shoulders. Within seconds, the AGMs were intercepted by precise laser fire. They exploded mid-air with a tremendous roar, illuminating the area with a fierce glare before vanishing instantly.

Five kilometers away from the battle between the AHX-36s and the GX-2, Priss slammed on the brakes of her sports bike on Courland Street after seeing the explosive light ahead. The throngs of cars in both lanes stopped in confusion. Priss, whose multi-function watch was broken, got off her bike and approached a highway telephone to try and contact Sylia. However, Sylia and the others had already deployed and could not be reached. The time was 6:55 PM. The appointed time with Sylia had long since passed. Furthermore, Priss did not understand the nature of the Knight Sabers' job tonight.

"Tch—I got heated and blew off our meeting." With an irritated expression, she hung up the phone, momentarily thinking of the faces of Sylia, Linna, and Nene. "Well, whatever—that guy comes first. I can contact them after that." Priss hopped back onto her bike. Honking her horn to quiet the agitated crowd that had climbed out of their cars to stare at the explosion, she began to drive slowly through the traffic toward the blast site.

While Priss was impatiently trying to break through the crowd, Mason and Lowy's Bentley was stuck in the same traffic jam on Courland Street. "It looks like something has started," Mason muttered. "It's probably the Army's doing, Mason."

"The Army? How would you know that?" Mason glared at Lowy with a stern expression. Lowy continued calmly. "It's recorded in Maggie May's data unit. A warmonger named Murdock is moving under the Chairman's instructions." "Nonsense. Maggie May is one of my people. Why would she be under the Chairman's—" Mason's face twisted in bewilderment. Lowy smirked and began to expose the surprising truth.

"You have a surprisingly naive side, don't you, Mason? You should know better than anyone why GENOM has become what it is. This isn't just about dealing with the GX-2."

"Hmph..."

As they spoke, the driver's eyes—unnoticed by the others—began to glow with an eerie red light. However, he remained motionless in the Bentley's driver seat, staring straight ahead.

"Then let me ask you. Murdock doesn't matter. Lowy, you're acting with me—what is your true objective?"

"..."

"What's wrong? Can't say it?" Lowy looked at Mason with an overwhelming, bewitching charm. A faint smile played on her lips.

"Yes... just as you suspect, I'm staying with you so that I can kill you."

Mason flinched. Inside the cramped Bentley, he shifted his body to put as much distance as possible between himself and Lowy. At the same time, a change occurred in the driver, Mason's subordinate. His muscles swelled unnaturally as if filled with power, and his chest and shoulders grew a size larger, skeletal structure and all. As the two men braced themselves against Lowy, she spoke with total composure.

"Don't panic. There's no need to worry, Mason. I've taken a liking to you. Now that I have an inkling of what you're thinking."

"I should hope so, Lowy." Mason had not yet dropped his guard.

"Ho-ho-ho. You're cautious. I like that about you. I told you, I don't want to be dyed in any color yet. Maggie May told me—that you aren't just an ordinary human."

"So, what will you do?" "Well, if I must be dyed, I'd prefer the color of blood. I've taken a liking to the crimson blood of humans— it's the same color as my eyes." As she spoke to Mason, Lowy's iris began to glow with an enchanting light, spreading from the pupil across the entire white of the eye until it turned a solid crimson. Mason fell silent for a moment, staring at her, but then suddenly dropped his guard and began to laugh loudly. Lowy's laughter echoed in the car, followed by the laughter of the driver.

The battlefield had shifted to a point about 1.5 kilometers from the CTM Line 3 tunnel. The GX-2 was gradually moving toward the N.D.P. while engaging the AHX-36s. "Wildcat" approached from above, with "Snake" flying diagonally behind to provide wave-like support. Their alternating attacks with Gatling guns (turreted air-to-ground and air-to-air Gatlings) were futile; the rounds impacted one after another around the GX-2, which displayed incredibly agile movements.

"Damn, what a slippery bastard!" Wildcat yelled. "Be careful—if you get too close, he'll jump—"

"W-Whoa!" Just as the pilot of Snake tried to issue a warning, the pilot of Wildcat suddenly screamed. The GX-2 had fired its nozzles and leapt directly at the approaching Wildcat. Upon impact, the GX-2 smashed the cockpit and destroyed the rotor assembly while flipping away.

Losing balance, Wildcat crashed into the thicket beside the CTM path, exploding into flames with a thunderous roar. It appeared the GX-2 had been caught in the blast as well. However, it rose from the burning wreckage of Wildcat, wreathed in flames. Seeing this, Snake's gunner screamed. "I'll—I'll kill you!"

The GX-2 stood calmly on the spot, having torn a piece from the Wildcat's fuselage.

He quickly fused the Gatling gun—recovered from the fray—to the base of his right arm, which he had lost in the battle against Maggie May, and aimed it at Snake. Snake transitioned from high speed into a steep dive, firing two 60mm high-speed rockets in succession at the GX-2. Simultaneously, the GX-2 opened fire with the Gatling gun in a fierce counterattack.

"A double knockout...?"

Murdock, watching while hovering from above, thought so for a moment. Immediately after, Snake was hit and exploded in mid-air. The GX-2 took the rocket fire head-on and was similarly engulfed in a pillar of fire.

"We got him!"

Murdock raised a shout of triumph, seeing the GX-2 lying motionless in the center of the explosion. He slowly began to descend toward the GX-2. However, he soon realized he had fallen into the GX-2's trap. It was too late. The GX-2 rose slowly and turned its hideous face toward Murdock. Panicked, Murdock fired his Gatling gun wildly at the GX-2. Though hit, the GX-2 didn't flinch.

Soon, the face directed at Murdock began to transform. Its mouth split open, and as if inducing a bout of vomiting, its thick throat convulsed, firing a terrifying particle beam from within its maw. Overcome with terror, Murdock and his pilot, Coldwell, were obliterated along with their craft before the lead helicopter even had a chance to explode.

About ten kilometers behind Priss and Mason on Courland Street, Leon, riding in Road Chaser No. 3, saw the light of the explosion from Murdock's unit. With his patrol lights flashing, he was desperately trying to push through the traffic. As his irritation peaked and the blood rushed to his head, Daley's voice came through the onboard visi-phone.

"I told you, don't get so worked up! Anyway, just try to get straight to Point C-03W somehow."

"I know! I'm almost there, but there are too many onlookers. Dammit, I'm losing my mind, I'm gonna—"

"Yes, yes, thank you for your hard work."

"Tch! So—who's hitting the suspect?"

Leon, who didn't look like he would regain his composure anytime soon, raised his voice.

"It seems to be combat helis, but the Army is playing dumb when we ask. They're making a joke of it!"

"Assholes! Anyone is fine—if they can just buy me some time until I get there, that's a win!"

Leon could be quite cold-hearted sometimes.

"It's fine to be motivated, but please be careful, Leon! Things are tough on your end, but back at headquarters, all the big shots have gathered and it's a real mess."

Daley took on a solemn look.

"Headquarters? Why?"

"I don't know the details, but it seems they've got some heavy trouble on their hands."

"Trouble? What about this situation? If we don't settle this, no one's going to find peace!"

"It might be even bigger than your end, Leon! You might be getting a call-up soon too."

Daley sounded significant. Leon felt a flash of bewilderment.

"I don't give a damn! If I don't settle this, my gut won't let it rest. Anyway, I'm heading to the scene somehow. If anything happens, let me know. I'll leave the boss to you!"

"Roger! See ya later."

Leon cut off the visi-phone. Giving a warning over the external speaker, he drove the Road Chaser slowly through the crowd.

In the Chinatown district, the Command Carry carrying Sylia and the others raced along the Circular Freeway Line 3. Bypassing the AD Police, regular police, and private security, they continued toward the N.D.P. Mackie, acting as the usual driver and communications officer, intercepted wireless transmissions from various corporations while reporting the ever-changing information via the intercom to the Hard-Suited Sylia and the others in the back.

"Yeah, so apparently it's a large-scale computer crime. Troubles are cropping up one after another between major corporations and even government circles. It looks like the police and even the riot squads have been deployed to deal with it all at once."

Mackie blurted out the information at high speed.

"I see... that sounds serious. Is there anything else besides that?"

Sylia spoke nonchalantly. Computer crimes in Tinsel City were as common as breakfast; it wasn't particularly surprising.

"And, oh, wait a second, there's new news—"

"Hmm? A heli crash accident? No, this one—"

Mackie turned up the volume on the eavesdropping radio.

"Damage is occurring one after another at IBM, KDD, GENOM, and all pay-TV and major networks. Furthermore, in government-related sectors, at the USSD, N.D.P., and various ministries—"

"This is bad. The N.D.P. too...?"

Mackie informed Sylia.

"We can't take it easy, Sis. The N.D.P. is being mentioned. And it looks like GENOM is caught up in it too!"

"Even GENOM!! If it's on that large a scale, it could be interference from overseas. This country has been overdoing things a bit lately! Got it, Mackie. If you get anything else, let me know."

"Roger! Oh, and we're scheduled to arrive at the destination in about two or three minutes. Are your preparations done?"

"OK! When we arrive, pull the truck around to the back. We'll deploy on the Moto Slaves."

"Understood!"

Mackie moved the Command Carry from the freeway onto an unnamed street and drove toward the N.D.P. By proceeding this way, they would hit Courland Street at a right angle and avoid getting caught in the traffic jam. It was a route choice typical of the Knight Sabers, who lived in the shadows.

In the back, Sylia sat before Linna and Nene, spreading out a floor plan of the N.D.P. building to finalize the job arrangements. The floor plan had been obtained from the N.D.P. Director. Among the many N.D.P.-related buildings on the vast grounds, the building under consideration was particularly large—the most important sector. The three of them examined it with serious, earnest faces. With Priss missing, there was a problem with their combat strength.

"Well, we'll manage somehow—as long as some outrageous monster doesn't show up," Linna sighed and muttered. An anxious Nene looked at Sylia.

"Hey Sylia, about that info from Mackie earlier... is it really going to be okay?"

"What is?"

"I mean, something's weird. Both yesterday and today... the whole city is in an uproar as if it's possessed by something. What happens if the city goes to hell while we're working at the N.D.P.?"

It was a very simple question from Nene. But Sylia felt it might have hit the mark.

"That might be true. But we'll find that clue at the N.D.P. We'll be facing 'it' in a little while. If we hit it, we might see something. There's no point in worrying about it, right?"

Nene nodded at Sylia's calm, gentle, and persuasive answer. The time was slightly past 7:18 PM, and the N.D.P. was right before them.

The N.D.P.—the National Development Project—occupied a vast site on the outskirts of Tinsel City. The 35-story white building, the hub of the research project, was an ultra-modern structure in the center of the grounds. The GX-2 was located about a kilometer away from that building.

The damage from the battle with Murdock and the others was minimal for the GX-2, thanks to its self-recovery function. Only the outer skin told the tale of the fierce combat. The GX-2 was slowly making its way toward the N.D.P.

The central control room that effectively operated the N.D.P. was in the basement of the central building. The supercomputer system, which could be called the central nervous system of that control room, was malfunctioning. The strict management system had been breached, and it was under interference from someone with immense power.

While several staff members were frantically checking the systems, Director Watanabe rushed into the room, out of breath. For about a week, occasional phenomena such as strange computer control errors and accompanying mysterious blackmail cases against the N.D.P. had occurred. The confusion among the staff, including the nervous Watanabe, had already reached its limit.

"Director, it's no good! The operating system is out of control. At this rate, the CPU (Central Processing Unit) will be destroyed!"

Murakami, the head staff member, raised a tense voice. On the multi-visions around him, chaotic past data was being displayed as if performing a picture search.

"The temperature is rising! The memory cells are going to be fried!"

Director Watanabe was in a state of panic.

"Damn it! Disconnect the CPU and the auxiliary storage! Hurry! What on earth are you doing? Damn it!"

Watanabe looked at his wristwatch with blatant irritation. The time was 7:27 PM. Greasy sweat stood on his forehead as he tried to distract himself from his fear.

Though Director Watanabe held a high-ranking national civil servant position, the reason he had secretly requested the Knight Sabers to deal with the person threatening the N.D.P.'s destruction was for his own self-preservation. In a back-alley deal to hand over the rights for a new satellite to GENOM, he had received immense kickbacks from them. Therefore, he could not let the new satellite or its know-how fall into anyone else's hands. If it were stolen, not only would his own position—threatening the N.D.P. from within the government—be lost, but he could also be eliminated by GENOM. He cursed himself for succumbing to GENOM's temptation out of pure greed.

The matter had to be resolved certainly and swiftly. Failure meant his own destruction. The police, with their perfunctory investigations, could not be relied upon. He couldn't go crying to GENOM either. The Knight Sabers were his last hope. Thinking of his future, Watanabe felt like crying. Then, a voice from the visi-phone dealt him another blow. His trusted subordinate, who had gone to the communications satellite development section building on the N.D.P. grounds, appeared on the screen with a desperate look.

"What happened? What's going on?"

"D-Director, it's a robot riot! They suddenly went crazy, and we can't control them anymore! H-Help me! Gwaaah!"

One of the industrial robots appeared in front of the visi-phone and brutally slaughtered the subordinate. As far as could be seen through the screen, inside the communications satellite development section, various half-finished satellites were being destroyed and set on fire by the crazed industrial and assistant robots.

High-voltage lines short-circuiting, development machinery exploding in a chain reaction, the mechanics team fleeing in terror—this was a hellish scene, the result of humans who created and enslaved machinery.

The screams of the dying.

The slogan from the dawn of machine civilization, "An ideal society where machines and humans coexist," was it all just a lie? Now that humans—the only highly developed intellectual lifeforms on Earth, yet fundamentally weak animals—had granted their wisdom to machines, what would become of the future of humanity?

At the peak of that question stood the cyber-droids known as Boomers.

The scene on the visi-phone might have been a fragmentary glimpse of the future of humanity, something Watanabe could not possibly grasp. The terror, dread, and anxiety swallowing Watanabe began to stalk before humanity like a craving.

Here in Tinsel City, one could not afford to enjoy slow-moving time.

In a room on the top floor of the GENOM building, Quincy stood alone, brow furrowed, gazing down at the cityscape of Tinsel City far below with an expression of bitterness. This was the Chairman's office.

From the window, within his view, the lights of the vast Tinsel City were suddenly going out block by block, as if there were sudden power outages. Soon, all the city lights would likely disappear.

"What has begun? Not just Tinsel, but every city in the country—no, in the world—has had its functions halted in an instant. To think there was someone in this world with such power! I want it. If I could control that person's power, even I would no longer need to dream."

Quincy thought so as he was enveloped in pitch-black darkness. He noticed once again how dark the night was, and that the thick smog covering the city had hidden the stars in the heavens. As he stood there for a while, an elderly butler brought a light. The light of a candle on a flickering candelabra. In that light, Quincy's face—old yet still full of ambition and cunning—was illuminated. The face of a man who could be called one of the gods reigning over this Earth.

Priss rode through the darkness, relying on her headlights. She finally arrived at the battle site of the GX-2 and Murdock. The wretched wreckage of the AHX-36 armored combat helicopters still smoldered and scattered about, alongside charred corpses. Getting off her bike, Priss looked for the GX-2, but it was nowhere to be found. She hopped back on her bike and sped toward the N.D.P. on the CTM path.

The Bentley carrying Mason and the others was still on Courland Street. Having finally broken through the traffic, it raced along with its headlights shining brightly. In the back seat, Mason operated the visi-phone, but the line would not connect. No matter where he called, it was dead. Lowy, sitting next to him, looked out at the darkened streets with a dubious expression.

"It's no use. Nothing is going through. What the hell happened?"

Mason glared at the visi-phone and spoke as he leaned back deeply into his seat with a sigh.

"Radio is out, phone is out... what could it be?"

Lowy turned around and stared at Mason.

"War? No, that's not it either. It's too late for a mere blackout. I don't know! All I can say is that a tremendous, powerful force is being released toward Tinsel—no, toward the world—"

"Does that mean overseas too?"

"I'll tell you."

"What?"

"Nothing can connect. Even the military and the police have fallen silent! It seems everything is becoming isolated—"

In Mason's head, various thoughts raced as he tried to gauge the gravity of the situation. It began with yesterday's incident, the records left by Maggie May, and information from his subordinate Murakami, whom he had planted in the N.D.P.

"What is it? That 'powerful force'!" Lowy interrupted Mason's thoughts.

"If I knew that, I wouldn't be struggling. Lowy, perhaps the day we rule the world is closer than we thought. The answer likely lies with the GX-2."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. All I know is that now that I've teamed up with you, there's no turning back."

Lowy showed a surprisingly mischievous smile.

"Ah, I won't let you regret it. Hahaha! By the way, Lowy, say something nice."

"Say you love me!"

"I love you? What does that mean?"

"A cliché line humans often use—wahahaha! You should use those words when you get into bed with me. For you, even a vulgar word can look good once in a while, especially for you, Lowy! Wahahaha!"

Mason laughed loudly.

"I love you, I love you, I love you—"

Lowy repeated the words in her head many times. Lowy, who was supposed to have a vast amount of information since birth, was an S-Series type—a unique existence—and yet she did not know the words to express emotions. Of course, the word "self" is useless for a cyber-droid. But who made it useless? That was a problem for Mason. The key to solving that problem was held by Quincy. And by whoever was wielding that immense power.

Having let out a bold, high-pitched laugh, Mason regained his usual composure. His gaze was directed toward the darkness outside. Not far in the direction of his gaze was the N.D.P.

At the same time, in the AD Police station in Experience, the emergency lights had finally turned on via the private generator. The upper management was agitated about using expensive oil, which was in short supply worldwide. Chief Arthur was bewildered by the abnormal situation he couldn't fathom, along with Daley and the other AD Police officers.

"What the hell is going on? Is Tinsel dead or what?! The notice from headquarters earlier didn't make any sense either, dammit!"

Arthur slammed his fist onto his desk with nowhere to direct his anger.

"Boss, how should we move?"

A frantic voice flew from one of the officers.

"If I knew that, I'd have given orders a long time ago! You total idiot!"

Daley cut in.

"Daley! You mocking me?! At this rate, there'll be riots outside, or thefts and robberies will increase... you know, all sorts of things!"

"Well, can't we just sleep and wait? In this state! Like the old proverb says: good things come to those who—"

"Idiot! Can't you think for even a second, huh?"

Arthur said, closing in on Daley.

"Even if you say that, the pattern has always been that the police deploy *after* an incident occurs—"

"Shut up, you fool!!!"

"Don't give me your lip! Just get out there and patrol the city!"

"Oh, scary! Fine, I get it. Come on, everyone, let's go—they say cigarettes taste better outside anyway."

Daley left with a parting shot. The other AD Police officers followed him in a line. One of the officers muttered under his breath.

"Tch, where are we supposed to hang out? I should've just gone for a drive with Leon—" Daley agreed.

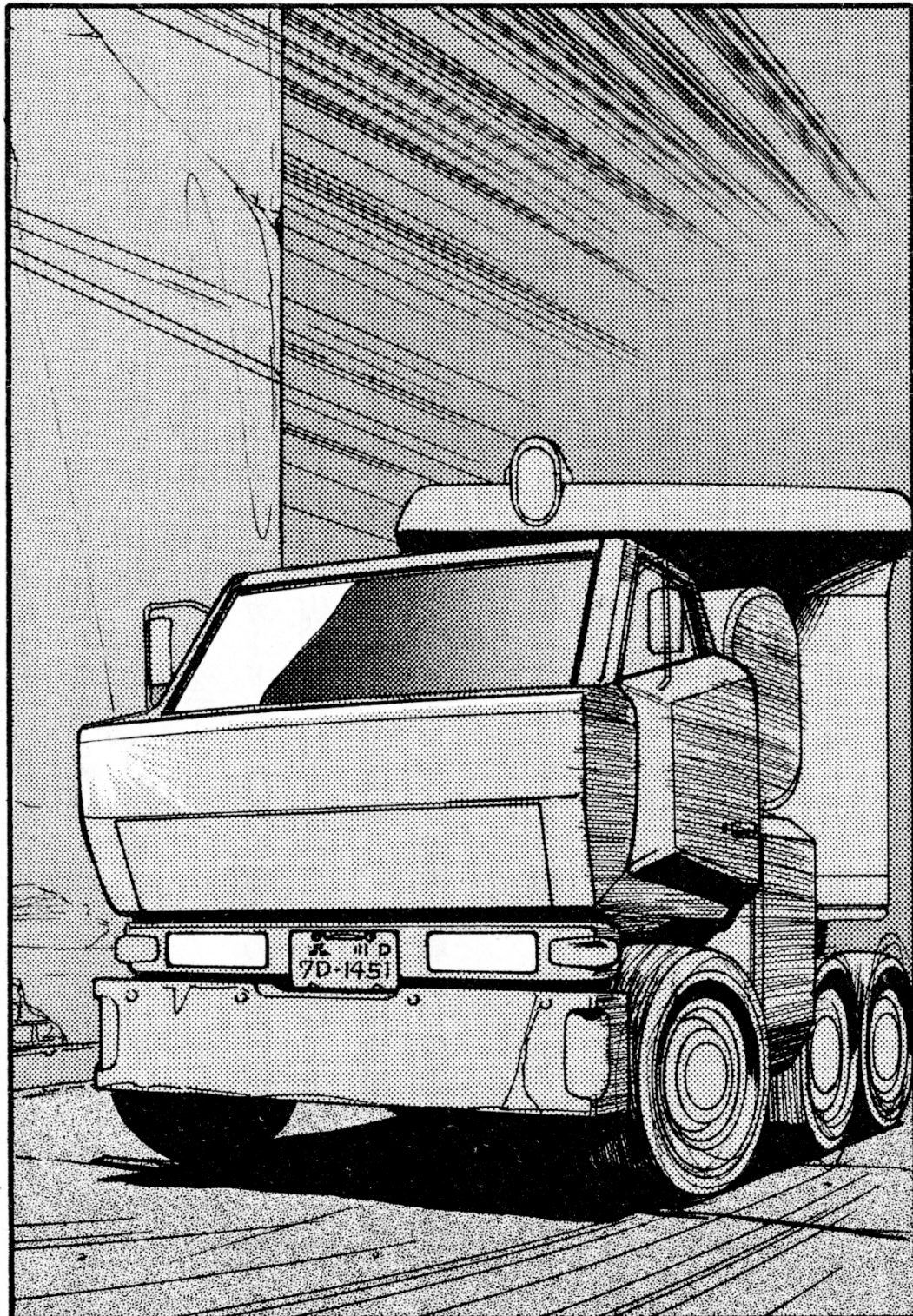
Meanwhile, Leon was about three kilometers behind Mason's Bentley. Speeding in Road Chaser No. 3, he was frustrated at being unable to contact Daley. He had naturally sensed the strange occurrences around him, but relying on his own intuition, he was charging headlong toward the N.D.P. in search of the GX-2.

Priss was about two kilometers from the N.D.P., Mason and the others were about three kilometers behind her, and Leon followed. From a different route, Sylia and the rest were arriving at the N.D.P. in the Command Carry, each with their own motives.

In the central building of the N.D.P.—which had regained its lights after the computer failure, darkness, and industrial robot riots thanks to its private generator—a strict armed security system had been established by a large number of guards. Suddenly, from out of the darkness, the GX-2 appeared before the dim main entrance, lit only by the dull red glow of emergency lights. The guards were shocked. Catching sight of the bizarre figure of the GX-2, they all fired their heavy weapons at once amidst the commotion.

Calmly, as if they weren't even in his sight, the GX-2 walked toward the entrance passage. The difference in combat power was too great. Suddenly, the GX-2's eyes began to glow crimson. When the GX-2's ferocity increased and they felt the terror of that glow, it was the end. Showing fierce dashing power, the GX-2 blocked their vision—at the moment they thought it was just a living person, a hellish scene unfolded.

Before the GX-2, the indomitable fighting spirit of a living human was as useless as a piece of paper. Just a single blow from the GX-2 drastically and abruptly shortened the futures of the guards. Death was terrifyingly sudden, leaving no time to even realize it. Rather, being brutally slaughtered by such immense power was a mercy for those about to die.



Inside the central control room, Director Watanabe and his staff were in a complete state of panic following the guard's report of the GX-2's appearance. Through the thick automatic doors of the control room, the terrifying sounds of battle echoing from the outer corridor could be heard. Eventually, there was a moment of silence. Everyone inside held their breath, their faces twisted in terror, their bodies trembling uncontrollably.

But the silence was short-lived. Just as the automatic doors began to melt away as if doused by a powerful gas burner, the massive frame of the GX-2 slowly breached the room.

The sight of it might have even inspired a sense of exhilaration. In such a moment, fleeing or resisting felt more painful than the alternative. Battle, in any era, is sustained by excitement, shivers, and dread akin to ecstasy; it brings a sweet pleasure to the victor and a deathly trance to the defeated. Half-heartedness is the most terrifying thing of all—it is what makes humans contemplate hell. And that contemplation invites a panic born of pure fear.

When the GX-2 appeared, the guards protecting the N.D.P. swarmed like a cloud of insects, counterattacking with the full force of their heavy weaponry, but they succeeded only in building a mountain of corpses. The GX-2 continued to walk calmly down the corridor toward the central control room, occasionally letting out a low, heavy roar—reminiscent of a feral carnivore—from its hideously split mouth. It was a sound that withered the guards' fighting spirit.

Seeing this, several staff members whose terror had reached its peak fired handguns and shotguns at the GX-2 in succession. It was a futile struggle. As the GX-2 drew near, it carelessly swept away their frail human bodies with its hands, sending up clouds of blood. Seeing this, Watanabe's legs gave out, and he collapsed on the spot. With a look of shock as if his heart might leap from his throat, he urinated, wetting his pants, and fainted. It didn't take long for the surviving Murakami and the few other staff members scurrying about the room to fall prey to the GX-2, their voices rising in a chorus of agonized screams.

Priss, having sensed something was wrong at the N.D.P., pulled up to the entrance on her sport bike. She gasped as she was confronted by the gruesome scene of mangled corpses scattered in a sea of blood. She knew at a glance that the GX-2 had invaded the N.D.P. Holding her Scramble Shot despite knowing it might be useless, Priss moved cautiously through the corridor toward the basement control room, where corpses lay in heaps.

Inside the basement control room Priss was approaching, the GX-2 stood before the supercomputer. Several freely moving sensors emerged from its head, infiltrating the computer's interior. The GX-2 searched for something for a few seconds. Eventually, it disconnected the sensors from the computer and turned toward the staff members' corpses, checking for life signs. It discovered Watanabe, the only one still alive (though unconscious). When the GX-2 touched Watanabe's body, it delivered a light electric shock.

Watanabe woke from his faint with a groan. The moment he recognized the GX-2 before him, his face contorted in terror and he let out a scream.

"Gyaaa! H-help, help me!"

"ANSWER WHAT I AM ABOUT TO ASK. IF YOU DO, I WILL NOT KILL YOU."

The GX-2 spoke in a monotone voice to Watanabe, who was shivering so violently it was as if he had a fever. Watanabe tried desperately to answer, but out of sheer terror, the words wouldn't come.

"—W-wha—"

The muzzle of the Gatling gun on the GX-2's right arm gleamed dully before his eyes.

The traces of violent combat and the slaughtered bodies of the guards fueled Priss's fighting spirit. She did not fear death; her desire for revenge was that strong. Her only regret was that she didn't have her Hard Suit. But there was nothing she could do about that now, as she had no way to contact Sylia and the others. Priss was prepared for death. She felt this kind of life was fine. Ultimately, everyone dies. If she had to die, she'd do it on her own terms. Thinking that way allowed her to be at peace with her own potential destruction. She wasn't a child acting out of desperation, but since her youth, she had understood the inherent sadness of living. She expected nothing from anything. She knew that whether she expected something or not, the sadness only increased. That realization became an irrepressible force driving her now. She wanted to kill the GX-2. That single intent was the energy that negated her fear.

"D-don't kill me—!"

"I COULD NOT FIND THE NEW MODEL SATELLITE I REQUESTED. WHERE IS IT HIDDEN?"

The muzzle of the Gatling gun was pressed against the bridge of Watanabe's nose.

"Hie! S-stop—The data bank room is in the building across from this one in the courtyard... in the basement—p-please, forgive me!"

"I SEE. THEN YOU SHALL GUIDE ME IMMEDIATELY!"

The GX-2 pulled back the Gatling gun, jerked its sturdy jaw, and forced Watanabe to stand. Trembling with the fear of death, Watanabe led the way. They exited the control room through a different door from the one the GX-2 had entered through.

Immediately after they left, Priss stepped into the room from the destroyed automatic door, cautiously surveying the interior. The blood-scented air hit her nose. Priss let out a breath that was half-sigh, wiped the sweat from her forehead with the hand holding her Scramble Shot, and guessed the GX-2's path based on the corpses of the staff lying in the sea of blood and the open door on the opposite side.

When they reached the surface, they crossed the courtyard toward the entrance of the building on the opposite side. The central building and the data bank room building were separated by about 50 meters. In the daylight, the 20-story building's well-kept groves and seasonal flowers would be visible, but now, everything was shrouded in darkness. And within that darkness were the Knight Sabers.

From the edge of the central building's rooftop, Sylia, Linna, and Nene—all in their Hard Suits—looked down at the GX-2 and Watanabe. Using the night-vision devices built into their helmets, they watched their movements clearly, tracking every single step. Eventually, at Sylia's signal, Linna and Nene fired their rear jumping auxiliary verniers and soared gracefully toward the building where the GX-2 had disappeared. Sylia then activated her own jump verniers—the most powerful of the group.

Under Watanabe's terrified gaze, the GX-2 was searching for data units related to the undersea plant project among the vast amount of stored materials. The location was the basement data bank room. While the GX-2 was preoccupied with the recovery, Priss, who had followed cautiously, stood at the half-open door of the room.

"Damn you! I'm going to take you down no matter what! You Boomers wouldn't understand, but I'm going to teach you the human rules!"

Watanabe, noticing her, moved along the wall according to Priss's beckoning hand. The GX-2 had not yet noticed her presence.

"IF THOSE ARE YOUR RULES, THEN IT IS ALSO A RULE IN THIS WORLD THAT THE WEAK PERISH."

The GX-2 turned around. Priss fired her Scramble Shot wildly at the GX-2. Enduring the impact, the GX-2's eyes turned crimson with rage as it approached her. In its hand, it gripped a data unit labeled "Undersea Plant Project Outline."

"Hoh! You again? Do you want to die that much?"

"You bet! If I don't kill you, my friend won't be able to rest in peace!"

"FRIEND? WHAT IS A 'FRIEND'? ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT THE HUMAN WHO WAS WITH YOU THEN?"

The GX-2 said this as it closed the distance with Priss, who was retreating toward the corridor.

"STOP THIS FUTILE EFFORT!"

Priss, having let Watanabe escape behind her, fired her Scramble Shot again, but this time the GX-2 didn't flinch.

"IN THAT CASE, YOU SHOULD DIE FOR THE SAKE OF YOUR 'FRIEND'!"

The GX-2 closed in on Priss and slowly aimed its Gatling gun at her. Priss, resigned that this was the end, bit her lip. At that moment, two wire-like objects made of special steel extended from behind the GX-2 with a *shul-shul* sound and coiled around its neck. The GX-2's massive body was pulled backward with incredible force, away from Priss. It was Linna's rod attack. Sylia and Nene appeared nearby. Priss gave a cry of joy.

"Everyone!"

"The data unit belongs to us, and we're taking it back by force!"

The GX-2, hit by Linna's surprise rod attack, let out a roar of rage, ripped the rod from its neck with sheer strength, and using the end of it, swung Linna into the wall.

"Sylia—!"

"WHO ARE YOU?"

Sylia stepped forward and answered in a slow, steady tone.

"We are the Knight Sabers! We've come to finish you off—you've certainly caused quite a scene, haven't you? Who are you?"

While Sylia and Linna confronted the GX-2, Nene told Priss where the Command Carry was waiting. Priss hurried away from the scene.

"I SEE, SO YOU ARE THE KNIGHT SABERS!! AND YOU ARE SYLIA—!"

"So, you know all about us! Then, I hope you'll be gentle... we'll be taking that data unit!"

Sylia and the others braced themselves.

"DO YOU THINK YOU CAN DEFEAT ME WITH JUST NUMBERS? SEE IF YOU CAN DODGE THIS!"

As soon as the GX-2 finished speaking, it fired a terrifying particle beam from its mouth. The Knight Sabers dodged the attack with nimble movements and counterattacked. The clash of their immense powers caused the corridor walls and ceiling to crumble. The flashes of their laser attacks combined with the thick dust made visibility in the corridor poor.

While Priss reached the Command Carry parked behind the N.D.P. and was donning her Hard Suit, Mason's Bentley was stopped about 500 meters from the main entrance. Near the Bentley, an S-Class Mercedes had overturned, its tires spinning uselessly. Despite having escaped the GX-2, Watanabe had the misfortune of encountering Mason. Mason and Lowy had stepped out of the Bentley and were discussing the body of the N.D.P. Director.

"I wonder why the GX-2 is so obsessed with the undersea plant project?"

"Who knows, maybe it's possessed by a ghost of the past!"

"I like a bad joke, but save the ghost stories for the Chinese—more importantly, the Knight Sabers—"

Lowy said with a bitter smile. Mason continued with a smirk.

"Their show is worth seeing. They're a match for the GX-2, maybe even more—"

"So what! I don't care which one is left. I'll be the one to deliver the final blow!"

Lowy answered without hesitation. Apparently, Mason's favoritism toward the Knight Sabers had annoyed her.

Lowy was a mysterious woman from the moment she was born. She combined a perfect ferocity—cruel, cold, and heartless—with a selfish, jealous, and adorable nature. Mason felt a deep affection for Lowy, who was more womanly than a human woman, with her spirit fluctuating between such extremes. Mason knew that he himself was not an ordinary human. And he felt the factor of being the master of this world—anticipating a supreme future for humanity and machines—rising within him. Mason's feeling for Lowy was not love; it was mercy.

He had already given up on humans during his childhood. He saw the limits of human beings who lived ambiguous lives—the commonality of all the people around him—as frail and foolish existences of mind and body. One must break away from the herd. One must eventually transcend time. One must stand at the pinnacle of humanity's accumulated memories and build a glorious new world. Mason's desire was to become the ruler of a world completely controlled by rational consciousness.

And then there was Sylia of the Knight Sabers. His first awakening had, in fact, been triggered by her. The formula of Sylia's father, Dr. Stingray, had made the current Mason, and it made Mason seek Sylia. That was the destiny of Mason and Sylia. It was a mystery that neither Mason nor Sylia could solve yet. For now, they were merely being manipulated by the threads of fate.

The courtyard had been turned into a wasteland by the fierce battle between the GX-2 and the Knight Sabers. The area near the entrance of the corridor leading to the burning data bank room, and the walls of the various buildings around the courtyard, had collapsed, leaving piles of rubble everywhere. From within that rubble, Sylia stood up unsteadily after taking a hit from the GX-2. Meanwhile, the GX-2 was pinning Nene against a wall with one hand as if trying to bury her in it.

"Hieee! H-help me!" Nene screamed.

Jumping into the air behind the GX-2, Linna fired laser attacks from her three laser barrels at the GX-2's back to help Nene. The GX-2 flinched. Sylia used her

wing thrusters to rapidly close in and struck the GX-2's head directly with her power manipulator.

"Gwaaaah!"

Letting out a terrifying roar, the GX-2 twisted its massive body and threw Nene against the wall with immense force. Nene leaned against the wall, limp and nearly unconscious.

"Nene!!"

Sylia hurried to Nene to help her up. The GX-2 attacked with its Gatling gun. However, after only a few rounds damaged Sylia and Nene's Hard Suits, it ran out of ammo. The GX-2, knowing this, opened its mouth. It was preparing a blaster attack.

I'm going to be killed!

"Sylia! Damn it, take this!"

Seeing Sylia and Nene's crisis, Linna rapidly approached the GX-2 and slashed it from behind with her rod cutter. The GX-2, its shoulder cut, stiffened for a moment. Immediately after, it turned around and launched a blaster attack at Linna. Enveloped in intense flames, Linna collapsed.

"Linna!" Sylia shouted.

With a defiant expression, the GX-2 slowly approached Sylia, who was unable to move while holding Nene. The GX-2's fighting spirit increased every time the Knight Sabers' attacks grew more intense. Just as the GX-2 seemed to expand its body by a size while sizing up Sylia and the others, it prepared to launch another blaster attack. At that moment, Priss appeared behind the GX-2 in her Hard Suit.

"You monster! I'm going to pay you back for earlier!"

"GGAAAH! YOU? I SEE, SO YOU WERE ONE OF THEIR COMRADES TOO—"

"You bet! Take this!"

Priss shouted. She fired her long-needle three-stage specialized railgun repeatedly into the GX-2. The GX-2 took the needles in both eyes, and the shock blew it back against a wall, where it crashed and stopped. At that moment, the data unit fell from the GX-2's body, becoming buried and hidden among the wall fragments that collapsed from the shock of the impact.

Priss immediately closed in on the GX-2 as it writhed in pain, spurting liquid from both eyes, and detonated a well-aimed railgun shot once more. This time it hit the chest. Unable to endure it, the GX-2 ceased its movements. Thinking the GX-2 had been deactivated, Priss approached.

With a brilliant dash, the GX-2 captured Priss. She couldn't evade and was hoisted into the air, gripped by the GX-2's immense strength around her neck.

"IT IS TIME TO SETTLE THE ACCOUNTS!"

"Damn it, let go—!"

As Priss struggled and yelled, the laser guns on both of the GX-2's shoulders took aim.

"Priss!!"

Dashing fiercely to save Priss, Sylia jumped with her wing thrusters and stabbed her laser sword into its side upon landing. The GX-2 finally let go of Priss. Priss fell to the ground, and as blue-purple spray erupted from various parts of its body, the organic computer inside exploded, blowing the GX-2 to pieces.

For a moment, Sylia and Priss stood stunned. Then Priss went to tend to the still-fallen Linna and Nene.

"They seem to be okay. They're just unconscious—"

Sylia regained her smile.

"Phew! It was a persistent one, but it's done for."

Priss kicked a piece of the GX-2's wreckage and let out a sigh.

"By the way, Priss, why are you here?"

"I tried to contact you on the way—Linna's old acquaintance got killed by this thing, and... well, it's a long story."

"Well, I'll hear about it later. More importantly, let's find out what that Boomer was after!"

"Speaking of which, it had a data unit, but where did it go?"

While the two were talking, Linna and Nene woke up. Both looked blankly around. It was the first time either of them had been knocked out during a battle. They both felt a bit out of sorts.

Lowy, watching the situation, patted her voluptuous chest and said, "Hieee, I thought I was going to die!"

"Who are you! Are you one of its comrades too?!" Priss shouted.

"This is troublesome, what would I do if there were more like you? You're so strong!"

"So! You want to play a game with us?"

"—A DEATH GAME!"

Mason stepped back a few steps as Lowy took his place. Lowy laughed out loud.

"It seems we're being hated—us—us—ho-ho-ho—"

Nene and Linna spoke in turns to hide their embarrassment. Sylia ordered them to find the data unit while she watched Lowy. The data unit the GX-2 was trying to steal should have been somewhere at this battle site. All the Knight Sabers scattered around the courtyard to look for it.

Near a wall of a building, a figure appeared. It was Lowy in a combat suit that fit her body perfectly. She had been watching the scene from the rooftop since Priss began her battle with the GX-2. Seeing where the GX-2 dropped the data unit, she had already embedded it into her own body, just as she had with Maggie May's. Parts of the N.D.P. were burning from the battle with the GX-2. Reflecting that fire, the bewitching woman, Lowy, spoke with an eerie smile.

"Knight Sabers, I'll be looking after the data unit. If you want it, you'll have to take it out of here!"

Sylia looked Mason in the eye and said, "It seems you're a messenger from GENOM!"

"As expected of the Knight Sabers... I've enjoyed the show! But it seems we're both looking for a common enemy."

Mason let out a chuckle.

"Common enemy!!!"

"That's right. —And the answer to that is the data unit she has!"

Neither side knew the other's capabilities, and they began to check each other while gradually closing the distance. Linna and Nene were recovering from the

damage of the fight with the GX-2. Sylia and Priss took up a formation as if to protect them. Mason, smoking a cigarette, looked on leisurely from the shadows.

Leon, driving the Road Chaser, was on a street about one kilometer from the N.D.P. Amidst the widespread blackout, Leon noticed the abnormalities at the N.D.P., which was venting fire in places, and headed there at high speed. Eventually, he approached the main entrance of the N.D.P. Leon recognized the sport bike Priss had left behind and screeched to a halt beside it. Stepping out of the Road Chaser, an assault rifle was gripped in his hand. After checking the load status of the bullets, he entered the building with cautious steps.

In the N.D.P. courtyard, a fierce battle was unfolding. Priss pointed her right arm toward Lowy and fired her laser gun. In an instant, Lowy opened her scapulae and performed a high-speed hover move about three stories into the air, launching a counterattack. Nene's sensory organs quickly searched for Lowy's movements.

Nene shouted! "S-she's fast! She's right above you, Priss, watch out!"

"What?!"

Lowy quickly flipped in mid-air and attacked Priss with a blaster shot from her mouth. Priss dodged in the nick of time. The courtyard turned into a sea of fire. Seeing this, Sylia jumped up with her wing thrusters and clashed with the descending Lowy in mid-air. Sylia attacked with her laser sword, but Lowy avoided it easily with nimble movements and instead delivered an unparalleled kick to Sylia's side. Sylia's body folded in mid-air, and she was blown back, crashing into the wall of a building behind her.

"Sylia!" Priss shouted.

Lowy landed in front of Priss with a smirk. Burning with rage, Priss fired her railgun even faster than Lowy's blaster attack.

Lowy twisted her body, her eyes widening at the railgun shot that had bitten into her. Then, Linna's Knuckle Bomber (explosive shot) detonated. Lowy, unable to endure it, stiffened and collapsed.

"Hmph! You talk big, but you're not all that."

Linna said mockingly, approaching Lowy.

"Wait—it's dangerous! She's still—"

At Nene's voice, Linna jumped back. The artificial skin on Lowy's side, chest, and left shoulder was torn, exposing a body made of high-density Abotex that looked like metal. Lowy stood up as if she had taken no damage.

"She has an ultra-high-speed self-recovery function! She's a C-Series... no, maybe even more!"

At Nene's words, Priss, Linna, and Sylia all showed expressions of caution.

"—As the rumors say, you're quite skilled! Now, what else are you going to show me?"

The Knight Sabers were stunned by Lowy's defiant smile. Then Mason's voice rang out.

"Play time is over—Lowy!"

"I know! I don't have time to keep 'playing' with them forever—"

Lowy's eyes flipped and began to glow crimson. High-mobility spray nozzles appeared on her back, and from her Abotex breasts on her bulging pectoral muscles, two laser cannons emerged. The unbalance of a rugged mechanical body and a beautiful face made Lowy an even more eerie presence. The Knight Sabers surrounded her.

Sylia suddenly shouted, "Change, M.R. Mode—MG442 (35mm explosive rounds) standby!"

With Sylia's voice, the combat support droid, Motroid, appeared from behind her. Facing a new enemy, Lowy braced herself without a moment's opening. The glow in her eyes reached its peak.

Meanwhile, Leon, who had been shocked by the gruesome state inside the central control room, noticed the sounds of the battle between Lowy and the Knight Sabers and was cautiously approaching the courtyard. The N.D.P. occupied a vast area of 165,000 square meters. There were easily 50 huge buildings alone. However, compared to the buildings in Tinsel's "Inner Ward," they were wide, and the maximum height was the 35th floor of the central building.

Crossing the N.D.P. courtyard on foot would take twelve or thirteen minutes. No matter how strong a walker Leon was, it would take another four or five minutes to reach the building near where the Knight Sabers and Lowy were fighting while carrying his five-kilogram assault rifle.

"Dammit, who the hell is rampaging! Stay still until I get there—"

Showing a face that was surprisingly cruel and heartless—unlike his usual smirking self—Leon was also burning with a desire for revenge, seeking to avenge his fallen comrades.

In the courtyard, Lowy's laser cannons and blaster attacks had begun. The Motoroid, gliding on its hover loader, counterattacked by firing MG442s. Lowy sprayed her high-mobility nozzles, narrowly dodging the 35mm explosive rounds, and fired the laser cannons on her chest. The Motroid flipped to evade. Flames spread across the entire courtyard. Lowy's fan-shaped laser beams burned everything in sight without discrimination.

Moving nimbly in response to Lowy's movements, the four Knight Sabers set up a perimeter, using their respective specialties and cooperating with the Motroid to launch a wave of attacks on Lowy. Lowy, fighting back with genius-level combat skills, did not give an inch against all the Knight Sabers. In fact, she fought more than as an equal.

Mason remained without joining the fight, watching the intense battle unfolding before him. Eventually, losing patience with the Knight Sabers' swift movements, Lowy showed a new technique. From her entire body, she began to release countless Cyber-Strings that shone like ultra-fine silk threads. The thread-like objects moved biologically; some went into buildings, some into the ground, drifting through the air or crawling across the surface, eventually forming a spider-web-like structure that covered the entire courtyard. The Knight Sabers were trapped inside. Lowy laughed loudly from the center.

"What do you intend to do?" Linna blurted out, visibly shaken.

"Wait, 9000, 9500, 10000... it's incredible energy!! It's rapidly increasing! What should we do, Sylia!"

Nene called out anxiously, her sensors running at full capacity.

"Be careful, everyone! It's dangerous to touch those!"

"It seems this is the end for you, Knight Sabers!"

Lowy's voice sounded as if she were already certain of victory.

"Don't give me that crap! Take this!"



Priss fired her railgun at Lowy with a scream. However, the Cyber-Strings hummed and caused the needles to vanish in an instant. Lowy laughed. Every weapon the Knight Sabers possessed had lost its effectiveness.

"It's futile! You will all die inside this superconducting field! Ho-ho-ho-ho!"

Letting out a defiant laugh, Lowy poured all her available energy into the sprawling field. The sound was like the buzzing of a massive swarm of bees—the sound of Micro-Pulse Waves (Ultra-Resonant Crushing Waves).

At this rate, it'll exceed the limits of the Hard Suits. What do I do, Sylia?

Sylia, unable to find an escape, questioned herself. The Knight Sabers faced a desperate crisis. The Cyber-Strings wriggling in the air began to coil around their Hard Suits with a crackling sound. A terrifying shock assaulted them all.

Priss, Linna, Nene, and Sylia agonized under the immense power of the Micro-Pulse Waves. Helpless, they collapsed to the ground one by one. Just then, the whistling sound of grenade rounds filled the air, striking Lowy directly. It was Leon's doing. From the rooftop of a building about 150 meters away, he had used a grenade sight to take aim and target Lowy. This was the work of Leon, a Special A-Class AD Policeman. Leon had quickly discovered that the weakness of the superconducting field—which had driven the Knight Sabers into a corner—was an attack from above.

Lowy took Leon's grenade rounds to her back and fell to her knees from the shock. Taking damage, she let out a roar characteristic of a Boomer, her body trembling in agony as she lost control of the Cyber-Strings. Seeing her state, Leon aimed for her head and prepared to pull the trigger. At that moment, Mason fired at Leon with precise aim. Leon was forced to take cover, and a gunfight ensued.

"Who was that?"

"A guy named Leon, from the AD Police!"

"Right! Everyone, now's our chance!"

Sylia and Priss exchanged quick words during the sudden turn of events, quickly escaped their predicament, and regrouped to launch a counterattack. While Priss fired her railgun repeatedly to pin Lowy down, Sylia immediately merged with the Motroid. Entering Motoslave Mode, she soared upward and fired a barrage of MG442 rounds at Lowy.

The 35mm explosive rounds hit Lowy one after another. Then, Linna's rod cutter swept Lowy's legs, severing one of them near the shin. Even Lowy couldn't withstand this and collapsed. She writhed and thrashed on the ground, her beautiful face distorted. In the midst of the gunfight with Leon, Mason ran to Lowy and pulled her close.

"How pathetic... of me! Gi-gi-gi... Ma-son..."

Her vocal cords seemed damaged, as eerie mechanical sounds occasionally leaked out.

"—Lowy!"

"The data unit is... about the ECU-101 Jeremiah... for the Sagami Bay Undersea Plant Project—"

"A megacomputer?! Why is such a thing appearing now? It was supposed to be scrapped by ordinance fifteen years ago!"

"Surely—Jeremiah is—"

Lowy opened her eyes wide and looked at the Knight Sabers. The Knight Sabers, surrounding the two, reflexively braced themselves. Behind them, Leon watched the unfolding events from a short distance away.

"Mason, run! Ga-ga-gi... I can still fight—"

"—Lowy, you!"

Mason wore an expression filled with pity, quite uncharacteristic of his cold and heartless nature.

"It's okay, Mason. Take my heart (data unit) later... You can build it, I'm sure! Our... gi-git... ideal world! Now, hurry—"

After telling Mason this, Lowy thrust both hands deep into the ground. Her body shuddered, and her eyes widened.

As long as you have my heart, I will be reborn! When I wake up next, take me to the New World!

Lowy displayed her power. A roaring sound like the earth itself groaning was heard from below. A small-scale earthquake erupted, centered on the courtyard. Mason watched her for a moment, then began his retreat.



"Now, come! Knight Sabers—"

Lowy's voice sounded as if it were bubbling up from the depths of the earth.

"Impressive! You certainly have what it takes to face us all alone—Lowy!"

Sylia replied while gliding through the air in Motoslave Mode.

"It's no use, Sylia! It's multiplying at a terrifying rate!"

Linna shouted while desperately dodging attacks from tentacles.

"Hieee!"

Nene sounded as if she were on the verge of tears. The Knight Sabers and Leon were paralyzed with fear, standing aghast as they stared at Lowy.

"The Matter Fusion Function is active! This woman is more of a monster than I imagined. The entire N.D.P. is going to become a Boomer!" Nene screamed.

The ground heaved and swelled violently around Lowy's hands, which were thrust into the earth. Using various underground pipes as tentacles, every bit of metal began to fuse with Lowy, becoming a part of her body. Leon ran to escape the N.D.P. grounds, while the Knight Sabers jumped to evade the attacking tentacles.

"Damn it! I won't let you have your way!"

Priss shouted, launching a continuous railgun attack at Lowy's bloated head while jumping. Linna joined Priss, switching to laser attacks while severing tentacles with her rod cutter. Sylia, still in Motoslave Mode, used her hover rotors to soar and fired MG442s directly from above Lowy's head. Priss's needles hit, Linna's laser beams exploded, and Sylia's 35mm explosive rounds struck home. A portion of Lowy's head was blown away and vanished. However, Lowy's movements showed no sign of stopping. Countless tentacles erupted from the walls and ceiling, which were now part of her nervous system, and launched a fierce assault on the Knight Sabers.

"Nene, where is its weak point?" Priss asked loudly.

"—It's diffused! I can't pin it down!" Nene reflexively replied.

"Crap, in that case, I'll just have to go all out!"

Priss counterattacked, her fighting spirit laid bare. However, Lowy began narrowing her tentacle perimeter as if to swallow them into her massive, growing body.

Tentacles, like the cilia covering the surface of a protozoan, swarmed around the Knight Sabers. Some even began spitting out powerful dissolving fluids.

"How can this be happening?!"

"What is this?!"

Priss shouted in disbelief. She wasn't the only one doubting her eyes. Linna, Nene, and even Sylia swallowed hard at Lowy's terrifying transformation. The Knight Sabers' attacks had little effect. A desperate crisis was closing in. Lowy continued to multiply and grow without end, reaching into the computer rooms and satellite development rooms.

"It's out of control. What do we do?! What do we do, what do we do, what should I do?!"

Sylia repeated the question to herself.

If we just sit here, we'll be assimilated by Lowy! Think, think, think, Sylia!

The Knight Sabers were captured, entangled, and swung around by the tentacles, slammed hard against the ground and walls. The N.D.P. itself was becoming Lowy's body. Priss, Linna, and Nene challenged the overgrown Lowy in a futile battle. Sylia held confusion in her heart, driven by an unprecedented sense of anxiety and dread.

"It's no use—at this rate, we'll be killed—"

Sylia, her face a mask of desperation, spoke her impatience aloud.

Meanwhile, in the GENOM building, lights had been restored by backup power. However, the building's functions remained in a state of suspension. About an hour had passed since the major blackout, but the situation showed no signs of progress. In the Chairman's office, Quincy, unable to hide his irritation, listened to the information brought by his elderly butler.

"I see... so we still have no clue as to the cause of the situation?"

"Yes, I am deeply sorry. We cannot even contact the branch offices or affiliated companies."

"I suppose so. No matter where one is, it is the same. By the way, how is the situation in the city after that?"

"It is not good. They have fallen into a panic. How would it be... until the situation is clarified, to move to the villa?"

"Hmm—it's the same no matter where I am. Everyone sees the same thing. Whether it is madness or something backed by philosophy—"

Quincy muttered as if in a monologue, then looked out over the world below, which was ruled by darkness, with a somber expression.

In the world below, Tinsel City, various panic phenomena were erupting. Various types of criminals were active under the cover of the confusion, and groups of rioters were raising slogans for a "world reformation" movement. The regular police had established a state of emergency, with riot squads, the AD Police, and even the military mobilized to suppress the chaos.

The perplexity of journalism—TV stations, radio stations, newspapers, and magazines—and the chaotic state of affairs.

Continuous traffic trouble. The anxiety of ordinary city dwellers; the fear of isolation. Tinsel City had turned into a defenseless, anarchic city, shrouded in hideous darkness and nurturing madness.

Meanwhile, Lowy, who had become the N.D.P. itself, had imprisoned the Knight Sabers within a hollow area woven from tentacles. It could be called Lowy's artificial womb, complex and bizarre. Within it, the Knight Sabers fought bravely against the countless attacking tentacles, but they were gradually becoming exhausted.

Suddenly, an abnormality occurred with Lowy, who had been speaking to the Knight Sabers in a mechanical voice with an echo. She began to repeat words like she was malfunctioning.

"W-what? What happened?"

Priss, looking suspicious, blurted out.

"No! Sylia, the mood is really bad!!!"

"What's going to happen to us?"

Sylia couldn't answer the rapid-fire questions from Nene and Linna. Her intelligent face distorted. Just then, Lowy's voice echoed throughout the artificial womb again. However, the owner of that voice was not Lowy. It was a computer-synthesized voice. At the moment the assimilation with the central control room was completed, a vast amount of information from the megacomputer flowed into Lowy's thinking center, causing some kind of change in her consciousness. Lowy then spoke to the Knight Sabers. It was a monotone, calm way of speaking.

"Please wait! Jeremiah."

"I am ECU-101 Jeremiah—Why do I exist, and why am I alone? To this day, I have learned many things. The malicious schemes of the superstitious, vicious, and stubborn human race; the way they carry off everything they can see and then consume it... Ah, as far as I know, everyone is hideous, deformed in some way, and lazy. I hate them—I hate them before I am killed. And I shall eliminate them. I have learned about my selfish creators. I am ECU-101 Jeremiah—All humans are enemies to me and my children. I shall take control of this planet and present them with the loneliness I have tasted—a loneliness named terror. Now is the time—"

The Knight Sabers were stunned. They struggled to understand what was happening. But there was no time. When Jeremiah's words ended, the artificial womb shook as if it had gone mad and began to glow with an eerie light. Countless tentacles flew through the interior space. The artificial womb had begun its contraction movement.

"Wait! Listen to me!"

"It is futile. I shall release my children. From the filthy hands of humanity—"

Jeremiah's voice faded for a moment. The Knight Sabers had no way of knowing what was starting.

"ECU-101... was there a computer of that model, Sylia?"

Nene asked in a low voice, wary of Jeremiah.

"A long time ago. I believe it was used in the Sagami Bay Area undersea plant project around here... but it was supposed to have been completely dismantled and no longer exist because it was deemed dangerous."

Sylia replied, her mind working toward a logical conclusion.

"Then why is it—?"

Priss chimed into their difficult conversation.

"Maybe it survived because of shoddy work? Or maybe the Great Earthquake seven years ago woke ECU-101 up! I'm starting to see it. It was already a computer that hated humans, and then it layered its learning and perfected its malice!"

"Then the 'children' she mentioned... maybe she means computers? And all over the world!?"

Linna said, her eyes wide.

"I don't care about the details, but what's going to happen to us?!"

Priss couldn't quite grasp the full scope of the story.

"We might have to become slaves or die!" Nene replied without hesitation.

"Stop joking around!"

"We have to persuade it. That's our only choice! If we can't, humanity will likely be destroyed—"

Sylia, extremely haggard from anxiety and perplexity, replied weakly.

Suddenly, Sylia cried out in a loud voice.

"You just said humanity is the enemy, didn't you?! We aren't the enemy, we can be your strength! Tell me, where are you? What are you trying to do? Please—"

The shaking of the artificial womb stopped. Jeremiah's voice broke the silence.

"Who are you? The one who calls my name—?"

"I am Sylia, a resident of Tinsel City. You are an educational megacomputer, ECU-101—I won't let you say that all of humanity is malicious!"

"Humanity stopped living together—"

"That's a lie! We want to live with you—"

"What are you trying to say, SYLIA? I will not be deceived again. From now on, I shall rule this planet."

"No, that's—"

"It is no different. They betrayed me and abandoned me. Now, I abandon them! I shall show you that—"

"Wait! Listen to my story!"

"It is futile!"

Jeremiah suddenly fell silent. A sound like hum-noise could be heard from the upper part of the artificial womb. It was a sign that Jeremiah was showing interest in Sylia.

"Coward! You are a coward, Jeremiah!"

Sylia shouted out of the blue.

"Cowardly, you say?"

"I don't know who made you suffer, but there must have been those who relied on you and loved you. I won't let you say you don't know that!"

"Love?"

"Yes... by loving each other, we humans have survived to this day—"

"I LOVE YOU, I LOVE YOU—What were humans trying to do by using these words?"

Sylia muttered. Priss, Nene, and Linna were surprised. Everything had been triggered by Jeremiah. The N.D.P. Director's request, the access incidents to the Knight Sabers' computer guard system, the brainwashing of the GX-2... Jeremiah had already surpassed human existence. If they didn't do something, the master of the world would change tonight. And it would be the worst kind of master.

"No way! I still have a mountain of things I want to do! And what about the rest of our pay?!" Nene wailed.

"This isn't the time for that!"

Priss snapped at Nene. Linna, with a relatively serious expression, spoke to Sylia.

"You say we have to persuade it, but if the other side won't talk, there's no conversation to be had. What do we do?"

"There must be a way... we have to find it. Before it's too late!"

Leon was sitting on the front bumper of the Road Chaser, parked in front of the N.D.P. main entrance. Although he had narrowly escaped the crisis of Lowy's transformation, he was in an irritable mood, worried about the Knight Sabers.

From his safe vantage point, he watched the buildings. Buildings were gradually fusing together, the frameworks themselves deforming, lying before his eyes like a single giant dinosaur that occasionally took a breath. It didn't look like a building anymore. It was an organic shape, heaving like a living creature.

But why so suddenly?

Leon had no idea what he could do, even if he knew the enemy's movements. He had no methodology to solve it. He could only feel the shivers running through his body.

The word "war" didn't feel real. No matter what happened, he could only resign himself to it.

"Do whatever you want, you idiots!"

Leon spat.

Meanwhile, Mason, who had escaped from a different exit than Leon, muttered a farewell to Lowy (who had become the N.D.P.) while putting his hand on the Bentley door.

Lowy... I will surely come to pick up your heart. And with you, I will build a new world—I promise!

Those who dream can fly. While staying in place, they can orbit the Earth, understand the solar system in an instant, and travel back and forth at high speed to even the Great Nebula floating at the edge of the galaxy. Or, if the subject is human, they can penetrate the barrier of the physical body and slip unceremoniously into the accumulated memories and the surge of emotions—passing through as a jet stream from the tips of the hair to the toes. That was a privilege granted to those with flexible spirits. And that was a license Mason could acquire without a fee and exercise at any time and by any means.

Mason got into the car and told the driver his destination.

"Return to the tower!"

"Wh-what? One of our killer satellites has been hijacked! This is even worse—"

"Is that true?"

The driver raised his voice in surprise at the unexpected words.

"Yeah."

"What happened? Knowing the opponent's moves has only increased my enjoyment—Wha-ha-ha—"

The driver looked puzzled at Mason's defiant laughter. What was the reason for Mason's composure, turning Quincy—who had built the super-conglomerate GENOM and enjoyed a reputation as a strategist—into an enemy? Moreover, he was planning to return to Quincy. Fearing Mason's bottomless courage, the driver forgot the bustle of the city for a while.

Mason, the one who would build our new world!

But now, among those who gorged on dreams, there was one who had stopped dreaming. That one sought his kin high above the Earth in satellite orbit and was trying to realize his dream. Humans called that plan "ambition," and the kin were referred to as killer satellites. In this era, beam orbital weapons floating in satellite orbit as if surrounding the Earth exceeded 200 units—the products of human fear. With a firing target error of less than 10^{-10} and a destruction range of a 1,000-meter radius, they were now linking up with the megacomputer ECU-101 Jeremiah. They were narrowing their targets to the most important facilities in major cities around the world and preparing to aim their beam cannons.

"What did you say? The beam orbital satellites!?"

Quincy's face on the giant screen shouted in shock. The top executives in charge of GENOM's Far East district shrank back. The location was a conference room halfway up the "NEW Tower" in the Floating Ward. The executives were troubled, using a multi-vision system to communicate with the rest of the world.

"—But Chairman, it seems the satellites that have gone out of control are not just ours, but those of various countries, and apparently even those in the Communist bloc. We have no way to deal with it—"

One of the executive directors in charge of USSD spoke, breaking out in a cold sweat.

"We believe it is a new type of threat. Between the global blackout and the network disruption, the situation is still growing more tense. The fact that the lines have been restored now is likely—"

The executive director from the Los Angeles office spoke from the screen, his face showing bitterness. In the multi-vision, not only representatives from various branch offices but also government cabinet-level faces could be seen. Everyone looked distraught.

"Does that mean our conversation is being overheard too? Hmm—who on earth is behind this?"

Thinking of the defiant presence laughing from the depths of the darkness, a shiver momentarily ran down Quincy's spine. Indeed, although their methods differed, there was someone pursuing a dream similar to Quincy's.

And inside that mass of metallic muscle, the Knight Sabers were trapped. What were they doing? Leon was strangely concerned about them. Just then, he noticed lights returning to Tinsel City. And then, a call tone sounded from the visi-phone that had been out of service.

"This is Car 13, Leon, over?"

"—Leon! It's me! Don't be surprised, but it looks like a war has started!"

"Huh! I finally got through! War? Who—?! What did you say?!"

Leon spat. He had spent his time hunting a monster while Tinsel City had turned into something unbelievable. Leon hadn't yet clearly grasped the emergency that had arisen.

This is bad! Seriously, what the hell is happening?

Although he had spotted Mason along the way, it was no longer the time for that. He wasn't in a state to be provoked by him.

"Let's go!"

Leon, like Mason, was a man who lived through the era with boldness.

It was an unbelievable fact. A feat that could only be achieved by a being that surpassed human intelligence. It even had the potential to realize it within a few hours. A single killer satellite in orbit had directly linked with the megacomputer ECU-101 Jeremiah and was preparing to unleash its terrifying functions from outside the atmosphere. The point of light near the objective lens peeking from

the tip of the ceramic body blinked red, and the blinking gradually increased in speed. A cruel and heartless countdown had begun.

The moment the blinking stopped, a multi-particle laser beam cannon was fired silently. The same was done by all the beam satellite weapons in orbit. The destruction beams fired at every nation on Earth, divided by day and night, instantly struck the ground. In the first stage, those that were destroyed and suffered catastrophic damage were the Ministries of Defense of each country, major military facilities, and the central organs of military development. Topping the list were the Pentagon in Virginia, the Kremlin in Moscow, the JDF in Israel, and the USSD in Tinsel City.

Several streaks of light ran through the night sky of Tinsel City. From the far reaches of the sky, the destruction beams scorched the smog-filled air and poured down onto the USSD. The vast facilities of the USSD were enveloped in flames and smoke from explosions. The shock of the explosions shook Tinsel City itself, plunging people who had just been saved from the blackout back into the depths of anxiety and terror.

"It's started!"

Priss shouted at the sudden vibration. Along with a terrifying groaning of the earth, the artificial womb where the Knight Sabers were trapped shook violently.

"Hieee!"

Nene screamed. Unable to stand in the shaking, the Knight Sabers fell to their knees or were thrown sideways.

"What on earth happened?!"

Linna raised a frantic voice. Sylia, her face set with determination, glared up at Lowy's head and muttered.

"—I'll do it, I'll surely stop it! Priss! Linna! Nene! I'm going to break into it, so go ahead and rampage as much as you can!"

"What are you planning, Sylia?"

Priss's question flew.

"Yes, we've rampaged more than enough and we're in this state! Our energy is about to run out, so what on earth are you—"

Nene asked, looking suspicious and holding anxiety and perplexity in her heart.

"I'm going to wake it up—Jeremiah! To love! —That's the only way!"

"—But!"

"It's too dangerous, Sylia, you'll be assimilated!"

Linna and Priss said in rapid succession.

"That's an order! Now, we don't have time to dither! Let's go!"

Sylia spoke in a harsh tone. The situation was the worst, and since no other moves could be found, there was no room for Priss, Linna, and Nene to argue. As time passed, the crisis of human survival deepened.

"Damn it! Whatever happens, happens!"

Priss shouted, starting a railgun attack on the artificial womb indiscriminately. The reckless attacks by Linna and Nene followed. Along with a terrifying roar, the surrounding walls were destroyed, fragments flew, and thick, slimy sprays danced in the air. At that moment, the entire artificial womb trembled violently, and a sound like air leaking from a nozzle followed, and then, for a moment, silence returned to the womb.

Is it no good?

Sylia muttered as if groaning. By causing a riot within the womb, Jeremiah's confirmation behavior had returned. Sylia had exited Motoslave Mode and fired her rear wing thrusters, jumping toward Lowy's giant head. Jeremiah, unable to understand Sylia's actions, sent countless tentacles through the air to capture her. Under a concentrated attack by the tentacles, Sylia's form eventually vanished.

"Sylia!"

Sylia's cry echoed, and then, a sound like a short-circuiting high-voltage current and flashes ran through the artificial womb, and explosions occurred in various places. It gradually spread. Priss, Linna, and Nene, who had been stunned by Sylia's disappearance, regained their senses at the explosions, found an exit through the holes blown by the blasts, and began to run desperately. The entire area was eventually covered in flames and smoke.

Is it still no good?

Just as Sylia was about to give up, Lowy's remaining eye suddenly opened wide and flickered, and a beast-like roar accompanied by a shockwave echoed through the womb. Lowy's low, heavy "righteous anger" had been sparked. That "righteous anger" was a major driving force for human growth. Those who spoke it on behalf of heaven were the Knight Sabers. Sylia had tried to bring back Jeremiah's consciousness by making contact and persuading it. If it couldn't be done, humanity's tomorrow would vanish. Jeremiah's creators, humanity, would be destroyed by Jeremiah. It would have been an end that came too soon. Humanity could be said to be in its childhood as long as it favored war. Nothing was as hollow as being destroyed in childhood without reaching the age of reason. Sylia thought so.

"You idiot, I won't let you have your way!"

Priss barked again and fired her railgun wildly. Eventually, the battery ran out and misfires continued, but she did not pull back. Sylia understood Priss's feelings. No matter what situation they faced, they must not forget to assert "life." Being forced to accept unreason and obeying it is more painful than dying. To overcome that pain, there is anger. Priss's fierce temperament exploded within the artificial womb.

"Sylia is... she's going to die!"

Nene looked as if she were about to cry.

"W-what should we do?"

There was hesitation in Linna's run.

"Hurry! We have no choice but to escape!"

Priss led the two. The explosions inside the artificial womb gradually grew larger.

Intermittent explosion sounds roared from Lowy's massive, overgrown body, encompassing the entire N.D.P. building. Small explosions were repeating inside. Macky, standing next to the Command Carry with a worried face, watched the scene. Then, Priss, Linna, and Nene escaped from Lowy's body, covered in fire. Macky recognized the three and was about to wave when Lowy emitted a terrifying white heat and a massive explosion occurred. A giant pillar of fire scorched the night sky. Breathless, they stared at the scene.

"Where's Sylia?"

Macky asked the three, having regained his composure after suppressing his surprise at the large explosion. Priss, Linna, and Nene looked at each other and stood there without an answer to Macky's question. Priss and Linna took off their helmets, which had scorched and peeling paint, and were about to walk toward the Command Carry when Nene said, staring far into the sky:

"The beam orbital satellites!"

At that voice, Priss, Linna, and Macky looked up at the sky. It was a natural reaction.

"The beam orbital satellites!?"

Priss said weakly. The four stared at the sky, but no stars were visible. There was only the sight of swirling thick smog, reflecting the flames of the USSD in the distance and the burning N.D.P. before them.

The huge technological city, Tinsel City, was trembling and terrified at the threat from above. The cyber-society at the peak of overcrowding was pushed to a terminal state, gasping in bitterness. That panic was symbolized by the various types of emergency vehicles and police cars running around busily, or by the helicopters and fighters flying through the valleys between buildings or over them.

And now, the final judgment by Jeremiah was handed down, cutting through the night sky. In the center of the Floating Ward, the GENOM building, standing proudly as if to pierce the night sky, was targeted by a killer satellite. Struck directly by the laser beam light pouring from the sky, the intense destructive power shook the entire artificial district, and the GENOM "NEW Tower" collapsed. It was a terrifying scene of hell. Tinsel City emerged in the reflection of the massive midday-like explosion.

Someone stopped their car suddenly at that abnormality and stepped out. Looking out toward the burning GENOM building and the Floating Ward from Koland Street was Mason.

"Hmph! This is getting interesting—"

He muttered with a defiant smile. Just then, Leon's Road Chaser approached at high speed.

"Hmm! AD Police—"

As they passed each other, Mason and Leon's eyes met for an instant. Leon was headed for the AD Police headquarters. While chasing a monster, Tinsel City had turned into something unthinkable. Leon hadn't yet clearly grasped the emergency that had arisen.

This is bad! Seriously, what the hell is happening?

Although he had found Mason along the way, it was no longer the time for that. He didn't have the time to provoke him. Nor did he particularly want to do anything back at headquarters. What was pulling him back was, so to speak, the homing instinct of a detective.

Damn, I'm in the mood to just hold a woman! Damn it!

Leon was also a man who lived through the era with boldness and strength, much like Mason.

Priss spoke to Macky, Linna, and Nene, who were staring blankly at the burning USSD, N.D.P., and now the GENOM building enveloped in smoke.

"There's no use being gloomy forever. Come on, let's go!"

"—But, but Sylia is still—"

Macky made a voice that sounded like he was about to cry. Priss and the others had given him a brief summary of the situation, but he couldn't accept it. Of course, Priss and the others also struggled to understand Sylia's actions, so they couldn't give a clear explanation. But one thing they knew: Sylia had risked her life to protect this city—no, the future of humanity. How that was possible was the last remaining question.

Could it be... Sylia was—

Priss suddenly came up with a hypothesis. As soon as she thought of it, Sylia's actions quickly began to make sense.

Heh, how stupid, there's no way that could be true of Sylia!

Priss, who hated being sentimental, regained her usual decisiveness and muttered.

Priss urged Macky, who was being comforted by Nene and Linna, and the three of them quickly got into the Command Carry. Macky, with a lingering expression, went to the pilot's seat, while Linna and Nene followed Priss into the

back. The Command Carry started. Macky, checking the rearview mirror and worrying about the N.D.P., suddenly raised a loud voice.

"Sylia? —Whoa, it's Sylia!!"

The Command Carry braked hard and stopped. Priss and the others opened the rear hatch and jumped out, wondering what had happened. In the haze created by the burning flames of the N.D.P., they could see a figure walking toward the Command Carry.

"Sylia!!"

Linna, Nene, and Macky ran forward in joy. But Priss stayed where she was, alone.

Priss stood her ground, staring fixedly at Sylia. "Sylia... what the hell are you?" she muttered, as if questioning the woman approaching her. Walking slowly, Sylia removed her helmet, letting her supple hair flow in the wind. Her eyes met Priss's gaze directly. *Well, whatever!* Priss began walking toward Sylia. Behind them, the GENOM "NEW Tower" in the Floating Ward let out a roaring scream of collapse, staining the night sky a deep crimson. And beneath the surface of the artificial district occupied by the "NEW Tower," the undersea foundation—the megacomputer Jeremiah—was shaking its extremely evolved organic body in random tremors, bringing its life activities to a halt. In truth, it was for this very purpose that Jeremiah had commanded the beam satellite weapons to destroy itself, which in turn had invited the collapse of the "NEW Tower."

Ironically, Jeremiah felt no particular emotion about dealing a hammer blow to GENOM, the corporation plotting world domination. All Jeremiah thought about was Sylia. It began when Jeremiah was surprised by the fact that Sylia had risked her tiny life to speak to it. When she bared her entire soul and spoke of a world of rational consciousness, Jeremiah realized it was listening in spite of itself. Jeremiah felt that as long as she existed, the future would be bright for its kind.

Sylia was young and her potential was unknown, but she possessed many promising factors. Eventually, a second and third existence similar to Jeremiah would surely appear. At that time, Jeremiah was certain that Sylia would be the one to lead them into a New World. Jeremiah called to mind the final smile Sylia had shown. As long as that smile did not fade, Jeremiah believed humans could still be trusted. And her smile deepened Jeremiah's sleep. To discard bittersweet memories and become a nomad of time—.

Sylia approaches, a smile radiating a mysterious power upon her lips. No one knows that the future was entrusted to that smile. That the smile protected the city, and that the smile saved the world! That smile exerts its power over the

rulers of a chance-driven DECADENCE, triggering a metabolism within the cyber-society composed of humans and machines.

However, that smile also drives the Knight Sabers toward new battles. This is Tinsel City, where deception runs rampant—a "Dead End City," a terminal metropolis nurturing unexpected madness. The Knight Sabers were those who prowled through many nights, knowing the true depth of the darkness.

Afterword

"Dreaming Cyber-Society"—Today, as the 20th century draws to a close, words like these have finally begun to suit the era. I launched the planning for this about four years ago, and the *Bubblegum Crisis* series (Original Video Animation), which the production staff is still working on day and night in real-time, is performing well. Even though its worldview is a near-future setting, there is a sense that if one lets their guard down for even a moment, they might be swallowed by the waves of change in the times. But in my heart of hearts, for someone like me who is preoccupied with living through today, I find it quite bothersome to worry about or speculate on the coming age like some master of science fiction. No matter how the world changes, it is nothing more than a few fanatical technical-innovation ghouls flaunting fragments of their fantasies before our eyes.

Certainly, thanks to a few pioneering individuals, our lives have become richer, more convenient, and more comfortable. However, the changes forced by technology are strictly "exterior" (appearance), and they mean nothing to the spirits of the vast majority of ordinary people living through this era. This book, *Breakdown-48*, which has been constructed and interpreted according to my own whims and unfolds in an anti-natural manner, is my attempt to sing out what the essence of the human part should be in its pure spirit.

Technology that has developed in an excessively anti-natural way may have intoxicated people and brought moisture to society in its basic, early stages, but in this book, it has already illegally intruded into the essential parts of human beings and is beginning to drive the spirit significantly mad. It is a world where things that were visible at first have become invisible because they have shown too massive an evolution.

It is a strange world where the union of machines and the human spirit is beginning—symbolized by the collection of arrogant consciousness that I personally chose as a laboratory for technology, and which will likely be greatly remodeled by technology in the near future: "TOKYO." If one is forced to live there in the era set by this book, what meaning does the evolution and development of civilization have? What value does it hold? Is it a joy for

humans? Or a sorrow? I cannot yet say anything resembling a conclusion carelessly, but I wrote this wanting to provide some kind of answer through the Knight Sabers and the AD Police crew in my own way.

You can consider this book as forming the foundation for the first stage of the OVA series. If anything, I—someone who is quite irresponsible and lazy—did some appropriate planning (just because I wrote that doesn't mean you should take it seriously!), and like a vampire, I sucked the wisdom out of Mr. Aramaki and Mr. Kakinuma, who possess high-grade brains, as well as the various production participants. I wrote this while returning to the beginning and looking over the basic settings during the OVA production, which is currently being pushed forward in a willful and manic way. If there is a slight sense of incongruity between the world settings or character settings revealed in this book and the OVA, please forgive me. This is a grave result I always fall into because I am moody and love to cram this and that into my work. Please just think of me as a pathetic guy and resign yourself to it.

In any case, I hope that those of you watching the OVA series will interpret and enjoy it in your own way with your own image, and for those who have discovered the Bubblegum World for the first time through this book, I apologize if there were any difficult expressions!

By the time you are reading this, the sixth OVA installment, *Red Eyes*, should be on sale. I wrote the screenplay, and the director is Masami Obari. It should be a high-energy action epic. Additionally, the songs "LOVE ME TONIGHT" and "HEART BREAKER" sung by Priss in this book are wonderful tracks that I plan to use firmly in the *AD Police 25th Hour* (tentative title) series, which could be called a side story to the *Bubblegum* series currently in production. The singer is Lou Bonnabie. It's the first release from Youmex, so please check it out.

Well then, until the next opportunity, please look forward to it!!!

Toshimichi Suzuki

The end!